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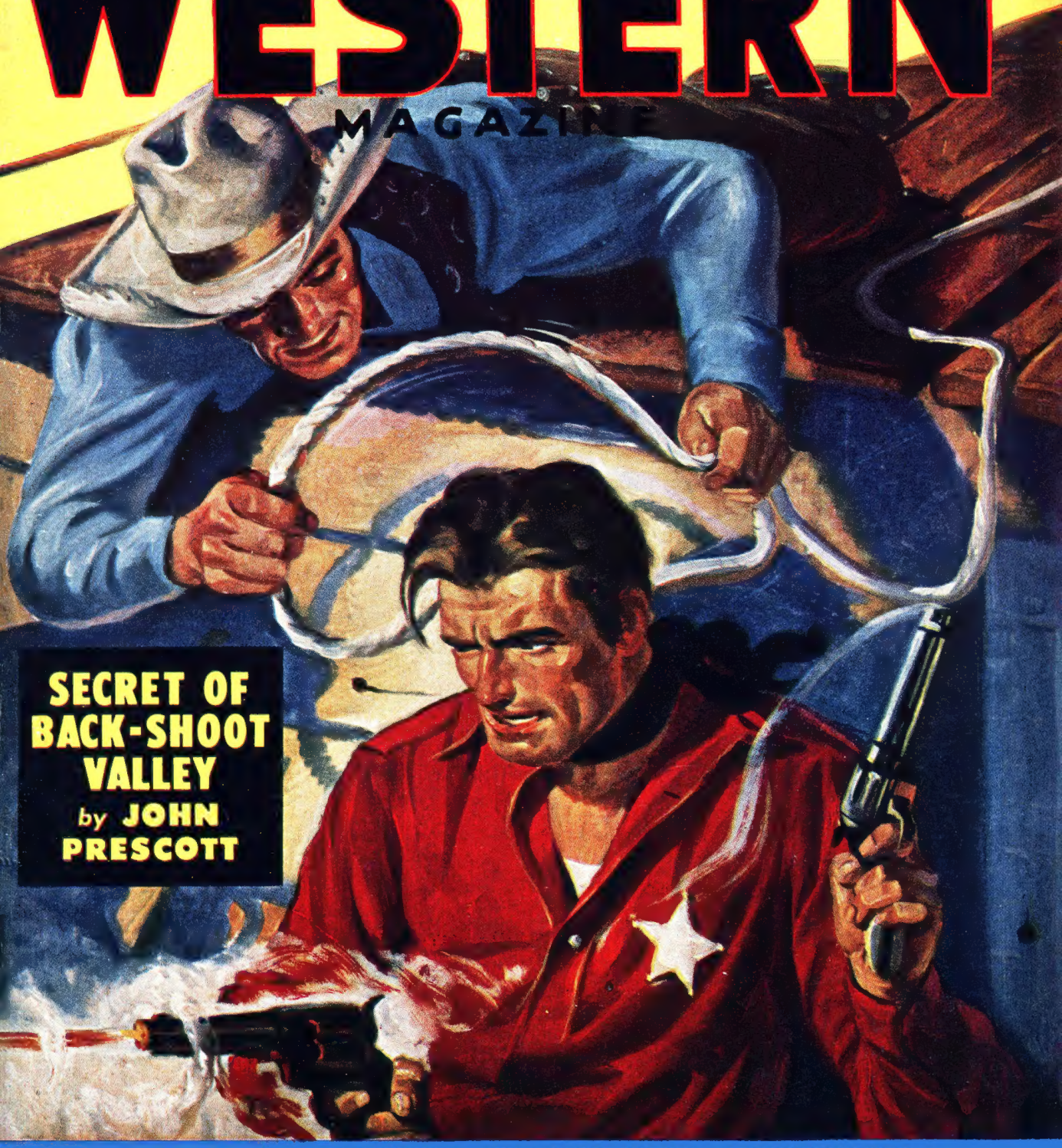

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Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

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For our money, the best quality of bravery is shown, not by the half-drunken bully whose blazing six-guns terrorize a town, but by some rather mild-appearing fellow who's likely suffering severely from cold feet, awhile he's doing what he has to do.

There was, for example, that day in Blackjack Bar. . . .

No one in that boom-camp was greatly surprised when Abel Conroy was elected marshal of that teeming mining camp. For it was generally conceded that Conroy, straight gambler, was about the bravest man who had ever hit the place. And when they pinned on his vest the new badge, every man in the crowd recalled the time when Conroy alone had busted up the notorious Ridgerock gang.

"A nervy thing, all right," commented mild little Hardpan Jenks, the store owner. "But Conroy has yet to show real courage!"

"You show us some courage, then," laughed one of the miners.

The little man only shook his head and smiled. "I'm a store-keeper, not a showman," he said.

It happened that Conroy was away from camp on business when Mex John, a miner, was stabbed to death, apparently with his own knife, and his shack robbed of five hundred dollars in dust. At the time his body was discovered, a worthless, half-drunken hanger-on, known only as Whiskey, had run, wide-eyed, to the doc to get some knife-cuts treated.

Later, a roaring mob found Whiskey, of all places, in the murdered miner's cabin.

(Please continue on page 8)

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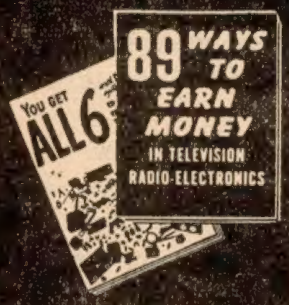

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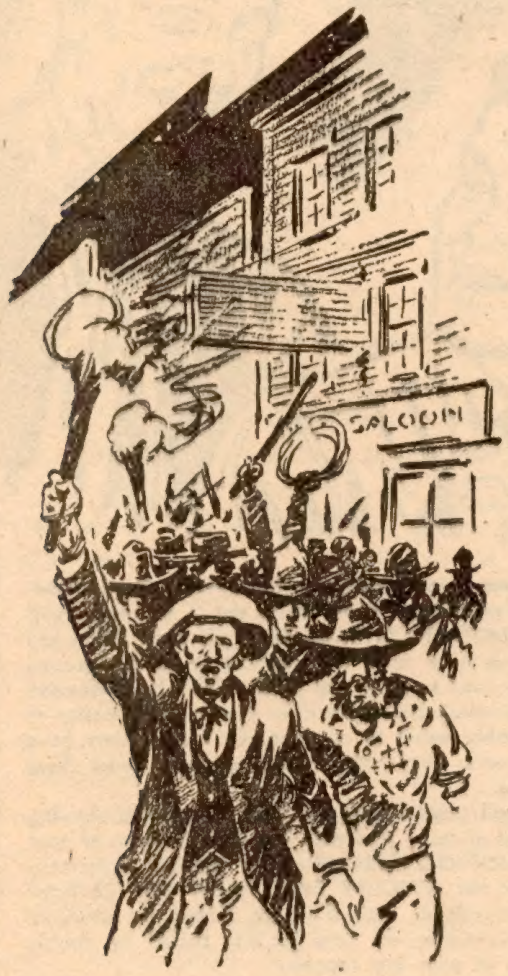
(Continued from page 6)

In a shouting, blood-mad pack, they rushed him into town.

It must have been the sight of those hungry nooses that brought to life some hidden



In a shouting, blood-mad pack, they rushed him into town.

energy in the prisoner. For, like a frightened rabbit, he twisted from their clutches and made straight for the first opening he saw—the wide door of little Hardpan's Mercantile.

Hardpan Jenks slammed the door, locked it, then stepped out onto the porch roof, to face the ugly, armed throng. A shotgun was in his hands. . . .

"I want just five minutes, an' your prisoner's safe inside," he said. Then he threw the shotgun to the ground. "Now," he smiled, "you don't have to be afeered that I might get panicked and shoot at you . . ."

Hardpan Jenks talked then, as he had never talked before in his life.

"I know that this means I'll be canteened out of camp, or that maybe some brave gent amongst you will shoot me down while I'm standin' here. If I live, probably I'll know no neighbor's friendly talk, nor sell you another nickel's worth of supplies. I'll be exiled in my own town. But I promise you that if you hang this man without fair an' impartial trial, the memory that you murdered him will haunt your lives.

"It don't take nerve to hang a half-witted critter like Whiskey at the end of a noose. Nor it don't take bravery to burn me out, an' shoot that stampeded half-witted feller in the back as he tries to escape bein' cooked alive. But it does take courage an' real guts for you to forget the holiday you'd have with Whiskey kickin' out his life on the gallows. It takes real manhood to be willin' to wait—until you're plumb sure he deserves to die.

"You can bust in here an' take your prisoner without any fear of bein' killed. But there's no one man here mean enough or low-down enough to want to do it alone, without the yellin' an' cheers an' the back-slappin' of the rest. Now give me your promise that Whiskey'll have a fair trial, an' you'll have your prisoner!"

Shame-faced, the crowd of hot-headed miners looked at one another. "You'll do, Hardpan," they said. "He gits his trial."

"An' any man who has the cold courage to do what you've just done," came Marshal Abel Conroy's voice, "should have a job as deputy. What say, Hardpan?"

The store-keeper shook his head. "If you gents know how scared I was up there, you'd laugh. Me, I'll stick to store-keepin'!"

We'll be back in this same spot on June 20th, to bring you more stories of the flesh and blood men of the old West by the authors who have the real color and excitement of the frontier at their fingertips.

Hasta luego! The Editor.

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FEUDIST'S BLOOD

By DONALD MURPHY

When the feudist patriarch rode out on his last, grim mission, he forgot to reckon on one thing: His own blood-pride.

IF THE hard-riding kinfolk of old Angus MacLeod had expected the laird of the hill ranges to explode in anger when they brought the belated news of young Jeanie MacLeod's runaway marriage to Pete Gault, nearly a year ago, those range-land clansmen were disappointed. Jeanie had at last joined her husband, and now, grouped silently in the huge living-room of the Box L, the clan watched Angus walk heavily to the dog-eared family Bible. There was a harsh sound of ripping paper as his hand snatched out the fly-leaf bearing the name of his daughter and the date of her birth. Without a word, then, he took down his saddle-gun.

The loading gate clicked shut on the last brass shell. "This night my daughter died," Angus said evenly. "And now we'll be diggin' graves for every belly-crawlin' Gault in the Gunsight!"

A red moon shone down on naked gun-barrels as the feudists cavalcade rode down from the hills. . . . .

It was an old story to cattle-land, this feud, which had started when Jeanie MacLeod had been a gangly kid in pigtails and young Pete Gault had been a button in cut-down levis which had flapped about him like the clothes of a scarecrow. First to settle in the Gunsight, the MacLeod clan had taken possession of the best winter range, the best water, in the hills. Then the Gaults, followed by a rag-tag-bob-tail pack of small ranchers, had settled in the valley.

Cut fences, slaughtered beef followed. . . . And riders on each side had found quick death from hidden guns.

It was strange that, in such barren soil, the friendship of those two youngsters should thrive and mature into love. But it did, and they had guarded well their secret marriage from both warring factions. Until this night. . . .

A shadowed figure stepped out into the trail as the MacLeod warriors came into the mists of the valley floor. A sharp command, and gunflame lashed out from the mounted men. Then from the brush-screened trailsides came the answer in six-shooter lead.

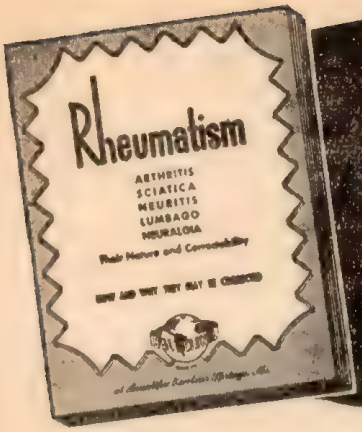
In the time-yellowed copies of the *Gunsight Trigger* you may still see the brief account of that deadly fight which came to be known as the Gunsight Valley Massacre. Caught unaware, the hill cowmen were tumbled from the saddle of their screaming, pitching mounts. And as the gunsmoke cleared away, a dozen hard-bitten MacLeod riders lay in their own blood, never to rise again. Dour old Angus escaped, along with a pitiful few of his men.

Later, in the ranch house, a mad light flared in the eyes of the hill laird as he faced the handful of survivors.

"Ye have seen this night the bloody work of an evil woman," he roared. "A serpent which I had nourished, only that she might try to destroy us. And she, like the others, must pay in kind for those who died! By God, I'll make them all beg me for the death they dealt out!"

Alone, he strode out of the house, saddled up, and was on his way toward Elwell, the nearest railroad point . . .

(Please continue on page 12)



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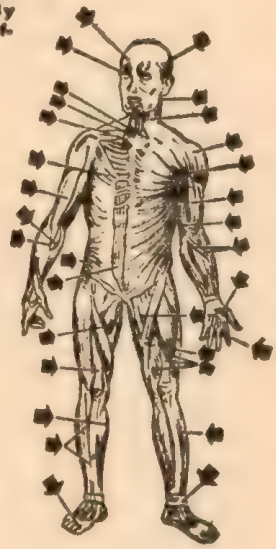
Where Rheumatism Strikes

Chart Shows Affected Parts of Anatomy — Any One or All Parts Designated By Arrows May Be Affected.



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PAIN — periodically or continuous
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(Continued from page 10)

A few months passed before he got an answer to his wires—in the shape of two score hard-bitten hired killers. It had taken his last cent to get that merciless gunman army. . . . Then Angus MacLeod gathered his gun-hirelings in the Elwell saloon and gave them their instructions.

Night had descended when he reached the little shack that Gault had called his ranch house. Boldly old Angus flung from his saddle and rattled his pistol-butt loudly against the hand-hewn panel. Then he kicked the door open and strode inside, his gun jutting before him, calling in his half-mad shout for Pete Gault to come out and meet his death.

But it was not Pete Gault who answered that challenge. From the shadows in a corner of the room came a little sound of pain. Stealthily, old Angus stole forward.

He found Jeanie Gault's big eyes staring at him from the rickety cot. The smile that curved her colorless lips did not stop Angus MacLeod from bringing back his free hand, as if, in one blow, to blot from life the woman who lay there. But something else halted its ruthless delivery—the thin cater-wauling cry of a new-born infant.

"Jean—Jeanie!" he growled, "where's your—where's the father of this cub?"

"Pete—" she gasped, hesitating. "He—he rode over to your ranch with—"

Old Angus's jaw tightened. "He left me nothin' to live for over a year ago."

"Nothin' to live for?" she repeated softly. Her thin fingers reached down. "Bring the lamp."

Angus MacLeod found himself awkwardly tip-toeing over, lighting the lamp. And then he was looking down into a red, tiny, wudged-up face in which, strangely, he saw no hate. Tentatively, he lowered his stubby forefinger, and the infant grabbed it. MacLeod snorted.

"Like his grand— Hell, he don't give a damn what the odds are, does he?"

"We—we're calling him Angus," she smiled. "He's so like you; so stubborn. But he's got a heap more sense. . . ."

"Dammit, gal—" Angus roared. Then he stopped as the sound of gun-shots came to his ears. Yet, above that, was Jeanie's weak voice: "Pete can prove that he had tried to persuade the rest of the men from ambushing you that night—that he wasn't there, and had tried to warn you, but you had already left," she said. "He got into a gunfight with their leader. He was wounded, and has been hiding out. . . ."

But old Angus wasn't paying attention just then. "So you named the kid after—" And abruptly, his vision cleared. There was a good range about to be gutted; there were women-folk and orphaned kids, babies like this one by Jeanie's side. . . .

Again there came the distant sound of rifles. . . . Swiftly his bearded lips rested for an instant on her hot forehead. Then he was striding out.

Angus MacLeod was old, but he was made of rawhide and iron. At least, that was what Doc Garns said of him; because a man so riddled with bullets couldn't otherwise have pulled through. For those hired gunmen had no idea of quitting that night, when Angus told them to ride away. They knew that by prolonging their red reign of murder they might stand to win much more than old Angus' top wages. . . . But Angus, sided by the very cow-folks he had planned to destroy, had paid them off.

He looked up at the girl and the man who had been with him day and night. "Me an' your mother," he said weakly, "started with nothin' over twenty years ago. An' we had a baby, too. I fought after your mother died, to make our dreams come true. It took our baby to really see that they did. Jeanie, here, showed more sense than the lot of us—only at the time, I never knew it. But now we can start again—with good neighbors . . ."

And then, for the first time in many years, peace replaced the hatred and fear which had clouded his eyes.

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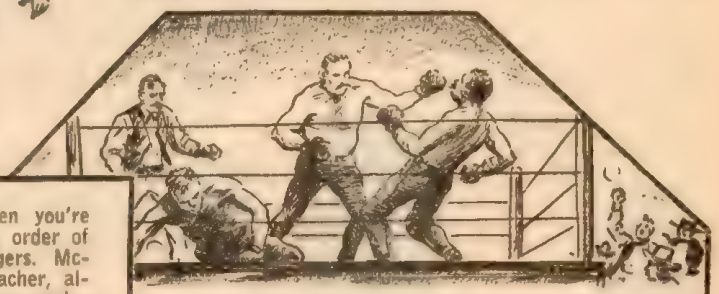
FRONTIER ODDITIES

by WAGGENER and ROBBINS

Port Stockton of Bloomfield, New Mexico, was probably the meanest man in the West. Early in his career he was made a peace officer because of his expert marksmanship, but when he made small storekeepers pay him tribute for protection he had to turn in his badge. Soon he found his real vocation —outlaw. In one year, Port shot and wounded a barber who had cut him slightly while shaving. Next he jumped a ranch below Aztec while the owner, a widow, was trying to raise mortgage money. Then in quick succession he shot a blind man, robbed a hospital and sold poisoned meat. With 15 notches in his gun he became a little too cocky and was finally killed in 1881 by a posse.



"Treat an outlaw respectfully even when you're blowing his head off!" was the standing order of Captain L. H. McNelly of the Texas Rangers. McNelly, who looked and talked like a preacher, allowed his men to gunwhip prisoners if they apologized when they were through. In 1863, McNelly and his men captured a band of outlaws known as John Regan's Kids. The Kids were a bad lot and had a record of killings and lootings several pages long. When the Rangers were about a mile from the jail where they would deposit the bandits, McNelly gave his men permission to "rough 'em up slightly." The Rangers went to work with relish. Regan's Kids were soon a bloody mess. McNelly then made a short speech. "I reckon you hombres had a rather hectic day," he drawled, "I hope we haven't treated you too badly. But Rangers will be Rangers."

Had San Francisco's Harry Freeley lived in this century he would have made a fortune as heavyweight boxing champion of the world. His matches weren't fought by the Queensberry rules. Instead of the usual single opponent, Harry would be fighting two battlers in the same ring at the same time. Harry was six feet eight, weighed 290 pounds, and could, when called upon, kill a cow with one blow. From early childhood he had been told that he had the strength of two and in order not to take advantage of others he insisted that his opponent always choose another man to help him. His enemies tried to get the best fighters on the frontier to team up and whip the giant but despite the two to one odds, Freeley went to his death undefeated. Oddly enough he died in 1864 from snake poisoning—but it took three rattlers to do the job.

Ben Dowell, El Paso's mayor in 1873 had a very difficult time in raising taxes to run his administration. The citizens agreed that old Ben made a mighty fine mayor but he was "kind of silly asking people to shell out tax money." Ben then issued a list of fines on all the community's bad habits. He charged five dollars to all law-breakers who went barefoot on the Sabbath. It became illegal for any man, woman or child, to speak loudly and unkind toward his or her neighbor or to "steal any of his or her neighbor's property without the consent of said neighbor." He also made it a breach of law to swear aloud in a saloon, to become intoxicated, to pitch pennies or to play marbles for keeps. It wasn't long before the townsfolk were begging to be allowed to pay their taxes.

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Secret of Back-Shoot Valley

A Fast-Moving Novel **By JOHN PRESCOTT**

The gun was chopping in a sharp arc at his wrist

Chapter I

Boothill Frees a Posse

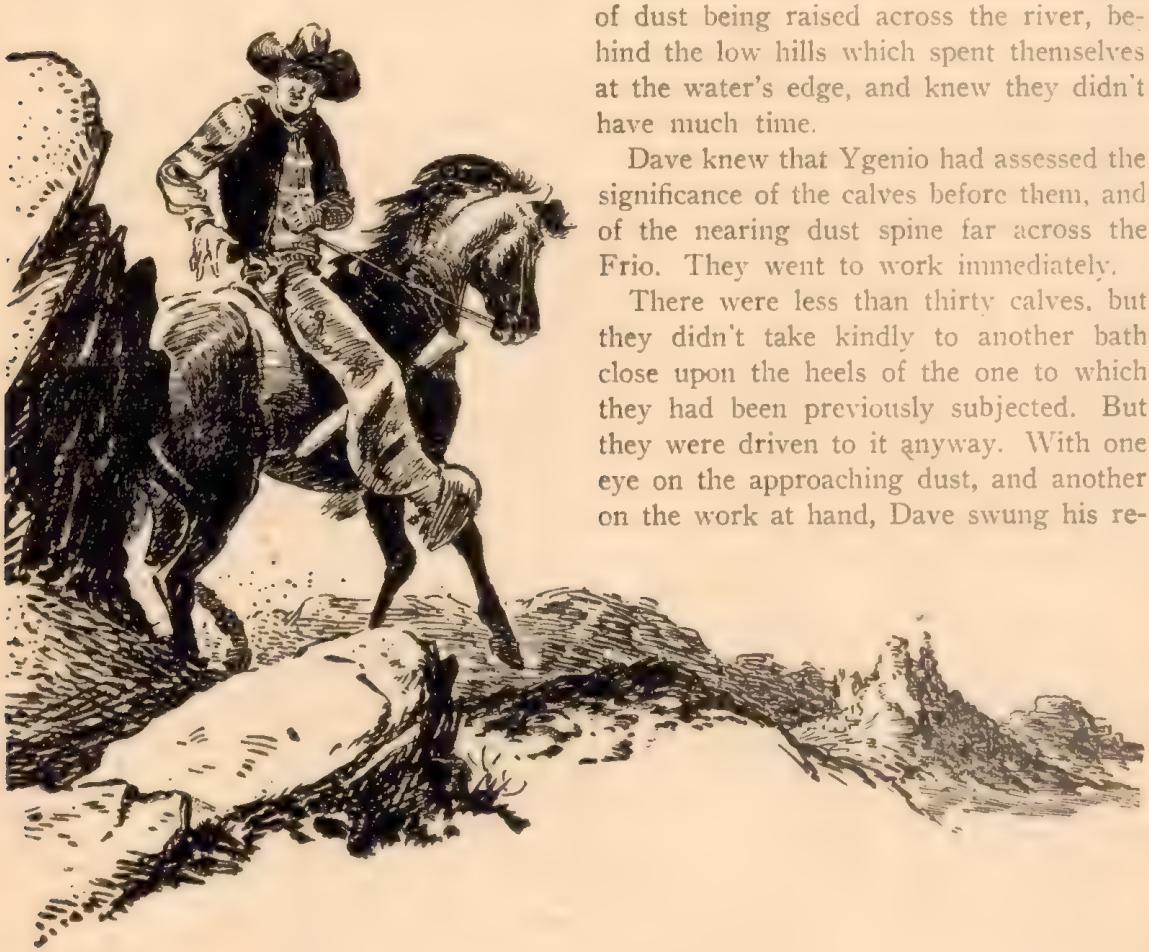
DAVE LOGAN and Ygenio Chavez rode over the rise and saw the gathering of slick stock down below. The young unbranded calves wandered over an area a quarter of a mile wide and hadn't yet mixed with the Logan main herd farther on. It was plain to Dave that they had been brought across the river from Wyland's range only recently, and as he and Ygenio descended swiftly he stood in his stirrups and sought for sign of his brother Wes. Damn Wes! he thought irritably.

Coming onto the level benchland of the river bottom, he slowed momentarily, and looked around. For as far as he could see to the south his grassland rolled and undulated.

Dave had already seen the slender spine of dust being raised across the river, behind the low hills which spent themselves at the water's edge, and knew they didn't have much time.

Dave knew that Ygenio had assessed the significance of the calves before them, and of the nearing dust spine far across the Frio. They went to work immediately.

There were less than thirty calves, but they didn't take kindly to another bath close upon the heels of the one to which they had been previously subjected. But they were driven to it anyway. With one eye on the approaching dust, and another on the work at hand, Dave swung his re-



No real man would stand by and hear his brother called a no-good, sneaking cow-thief, without a fight. Because Dave Logan knew it was more than half true, he couldn't hear it—without a killing.

ata and lashed rumps. On the other side, Ygenio fanned the air with wide swipes of his high-crowned sombrero.

The first of the animals were at the water's edge when the riders swung around one of the sloping hills and thundered toward the river. In the lead of this four-man cavalcade, Old Man Wyland plied his quirt. Behind him, two range hands appeared to draw abreast, while lagging to the rear was Wyland's only son, Jeff.

Wyland's crowd sloshed through the shallow water of the ford and reined up in the sand of Dave Logan's side. They didn't look like men gathered for peaceful parley. They were caked with dust, their mounts blown and jaded. Old Wyland slashed his hat against his thigh before he roared at Dave, "We caught you Logans at it this time, damn it all! Come over here!"

DAVE rode through the milling calves to the point where Wyland's riders waited. He didn't fear these men but he didn't want to start a fracas.

Dave lounged in his saddle and rolled a smoke. As he cupped his hands to light the shuck he saw the riders arrange themselves abreast of him. When Ygenio joined him he flipped the match away.

Old Wyland let go immediately. "I could be blind in both eyes and still know that stock is mine."

"I guess now we all know they belong to you!" Logan snapped. "I wish to hell you'd keep 'em on your side. They don't eat much, but I got other uses for my grass."

Lounging beside his father, young Jeff Wyland laughed. A fellow like him, Dave had often thought, seemed out of character in this violent country.

"That's good," young Wyland said. "I never heard of no thirty calves headin' straight off the range they all was born on. A body learns somethin' new about cattle every day."

Dave allowed a wisp of smoke to drift between his lips. "Is that a roundabout way of sayin' me and Ygenio stole them?"

Old Man Wyland regarded his son with pleasure. Young Jeff colored and fiddled with his bridle.

"I'm waiting for an answer," Logan said. "It seems to me you started in with something, Jeff, and I'd like to hear the end."

Old Wyland looked carefully around. He'd come down there loaded up with wrath, but a defection in his ranks had put a different color on it. If he couldn't depend on his own flesh and blood, who could say if his hired hands would stand beside him if trouble started. Old Man Wyland trimmed his sails. He said, "Maybe the dumb brutes wandered over here of their own accord, at that," he said. "Like Jeff says, a body learns a new thing every day."

"I agree with you," Dave said. "It's queer, all right, how these critters come over here, but as you can plainly see me and Ygenio were being neighborly and bringing them back to you."

"Yes, it does look like that, and I ought to thank you." Old Man Wyland squinted as the sun's reflection on the water caught him in the eye. "Where's your brother Wes, Dave? I thought I seen him wandering around the countryside again."

Dave threw his cigarette away. "It's hard to say where Wes might be right now. Seein' as how he's free, white and twenty-six, I don't think it's my part to keep track of him."

"Might be better if you did. A lot of stock's been missin' in the country since he showed up."

"Like as not I could arrange a meeting should you care to take that up with him. Does that appeal to you?"

Old Man Wyland gripped his reins. He looked at his son, and then his waddies. "I'll arrange my own meetings if it's all the same to you. But thank you anyway. Shall we move 'em, boys?"

WYLAND'S bunch moved in to herd the calves away and Dave and Ygenio crossed the rise above the river. Ahead, about a half mile lay the Logan ranch buildings. As they came into plainer view the rage Dave felt for his brother increased. Wes's horse was lazing at the tie rail out in front.

Wes was leaning on the dining table in the central room with a cup of Abrana Chavez' coffee and a plate of pinto beans in front of him when Dave and Ygenio came in. Wes forked up a mouthful of pintos. "I don't know what's been keeping you two from this cooking. It seems to me that only a fool would keep Abrana waiting."

Just then Abrana waddled from the cooking alcove with another pair of heaping plates. She smiled happily at Ygenio and Dave, and regarded Wes with a look of especial fondness; and Dave found himself remembering that, even at his worst, Wes was a man who could do no wrong in the eyes of Abrana Chavez. He moved slowly to the table, flipped his hat onto the rifle rack beside the fireplace, and sat down. Ygenio slipped onto the bench beside him and commenced to eat.

Dave took a swallow of steaming coffee before he spoke. "We just been cleaning up after you, Wes," he said. "Me and Ygenio had to sweep them Wyland calves back across the river."

"There's a dollar wasted," Wes said. "I'd about arranged to sell them off. Now I'll have to get them all over again. I suppose Old man Wyland near split his britches yelling at you."

Dave laid his fork on the table. "How do you know Wyland was there?"

"I saw him down there. Him and that weak-kneed kid of his, and you and Ygenio and all the calves." Wes inclined his head toward the rise beyond the buildings. "I lay up there and watched you."

"You got guts," Dave said. "If you're going to rustle, the least you can do is take care of what you steal. If I'd known you was up there I'd 'a put a bullet through you."

"Hell, Dave, it was just a joke. You know how we used to devil that old coot when we was kids. If I really meant to run them calves off I sure wouldn't have left 'em there in plain sight."

"Joke, huh. All right, then, maybe you can joke off the rest of the thievin' that's been goin' on since you got back. Wyland had a word about that. Damn it, Wes, as long as you're this place's part owner you got to live straight. You ain't done nothin' on it, but I worked like hell to make it pay."

Wes Logan seemed to find Dave's words amusing. He winked at Abrana and drummed his fingers on the table in high good humor. "I don't know nothin' about any rustling in this country, kid. And don't go telling me how to act around my own home. Pa left this place in splits, remember that."

"And I do all the work," Dave said. He was standing now. "All right, Wes, I'll buy you out. I don't know where I'll get the money, but I'll find it somewhere. I'll buy you out, then you can git."

Wes slowly rolled a shuck and lit it. In the cooking alcove, Abrana kneaded her brown and heavy hands together and shook her head. Ygenio made slurping sounds as he spooned his beans.

"And supposing I don't want to sell my share," Wes said presently. "Supposing I just like it here."

"Ah, *muchacho,*" Abrana cried, "our little angel stays with us. Is that not wonderful?"

Dave looked helplessly around, regarded with despair the great joy of Abrana, then wrenched his hat from the rack and stalked outside.

WES drifted off again that afternoon. He'd always been restless, forever wondering what lay over the hill. Even

when they were kids Wes hadn't been satisfied with simply living after the manner of the other settlers. His lack of interest in running of the ranch had been the despair of their mother, when she lived, and had filled their father with anger.

Only Abrana Chavez had glossed over his many faults and she still continued in that frame of mind.

But Wes had had his own ideas of the life he wanted. At fifteen he'd run away and joined a cattle drive to Dodge. That, and what came afterward, had kept him away from home for a year and more. As time went on stories of his escapades, perhaps embellished by re-telling during the course of travel, filtered back. Now he was riding for John Chisum on the Pecos. Again he was preying on that cattleman, or so the story went, and others, selling the stolen beef to Coughlin's bunch, who in turn made handsome profits on these rustled herds through the holding of government contracts for the Indian reservations.

Dave tried to put these things from his mind, but they were still with him when he and Ygenio went that evening to a meeting of the stockmen at the village schoolhouse. Cattlemen throughout the Frio Valley were there to consider ways and means to stop the increasing rustling.

Dave and Ygenio sat in the rear and listened. Their presence seemed to restrain the enthusiasm of those with troubles. It was clear to Dave that his brother, Wes, was to have been a primary subject for consideration; now they had to improvise.

Ed Stevens revealed that he had been separated from thirty head of the best stock he'd ever raised. George Rudabaugh allowed that Ed's misfortunes were surely bad, but that he had lost nigh onto forty-five. Dick Manson twirled his long mustache and pegged his loss at twenty-three; Jim Gallagher bespoke the theft of thirty-six in tones of purple rage. With the tally totaled, they sat around and groused, occasionally glancing at Dave and Ygenio in the corner. As a final act, Old Man Wyland volunteered to lead a vigilante group.

Outside again, beneath the ghostly luminescence of the stars, the stockmen paused for a final cigarette before leaving for their respective ranches. John Glendenning had a word of careful greeting for Dave Logan and Ygenio. Felipe Otero, descendant of a grandee, made respectful inquiry after the health of Abrana Chavez. Ed Stevens revealed an interest in the fact that Wes was home again, and what was that lively rascal doing now?

Dave spoke with all these men. They were his friends and neighbors. They had been his father's friends before him; en masse they had wrenched this valley from a wilderness. They had borne arms together against the Apache menace. Their respect was hard to earn, and a great loss when withdrawn. Dave agonized at the reserve these men accorded him; and cursed Wes beneath his breath.

Perhaps Jeff Wyland had had a drink or two, or perhaps he was emboldened by the presence of a crowd, it was hard to say. But as the others arced their shucks into the pale dust of the street, and made their good-nights, he sauntered up to Dave.

"I had in mind the mention of those calves of ours tonight, but it occurred to me that you might be embarrassed."

Dave took his foot from his stirrup, and looked around. Men inclined toward bed delayed departure. Jeff Wyland savored the effect. He looped his thumbs in the arm holes of his vest. He rocked slightly on his heels.

Dave looked hard at him. "I think it's time you made up your mind on that matter," he told Jeff. "I don't care for your tone of voice."

JEFF drew strength from the presence of his father and the old man's hands. He said slowly, "My money calls your

damned brother a no-good, sneaking cow-thief."

Dave Logan hit Jeff with a right to the mouth. As Wyland staggered back he hit him with his left below the ear. The loose-lipped young man reeled back and folded up like a jacknife.

Old Man Wyland didn't move but the wranglers did. The night was shattered by gunfire. Dave wasn't aware of having drawn, himself, but his gun buckled in his hand and one of Wyland's waddies fell. In front of him the second wrangler's gun exploded into life, then swung away as Ygenio blew it from his hand.

Dave held his gun and backed slowly toward the horses. When Ygenio was up and facing the curve of silent, staring men, Dave sheathed his gun and hit his saddle. Together they sat for a moment, observing the scene of battle. One Wayland man lay dark and quiet in the street, the second squatted on his heels and held his injured hand. Struggling to his feet, Jeff Wyland commenced to curse. As Dave and Ygenio swung into a loping run Old Man Wyland vented his rage upon his son.

"Shut up, you lily-livered whelp! Shut up 'fore I give you something to scream about!"

* * *

The sheriff called in the morning. Curley Rhodes, an even-tempered man, who loved his food, walked his horse into the Logan dooryard a few hours after sun-up. He had no stomach for his mission, and he seized quickly on Abrana's offer of a second breakfast.

"With your food in my belly, Dave," Rhodes said, "I couldn't very well arrest you even if I had a mind to. I didn't bring a warrant, but a warning."

Dave sloped in his chair and hooked a leg across the arm of it. "Get on with it," he said. "I know you didn't come for fun."

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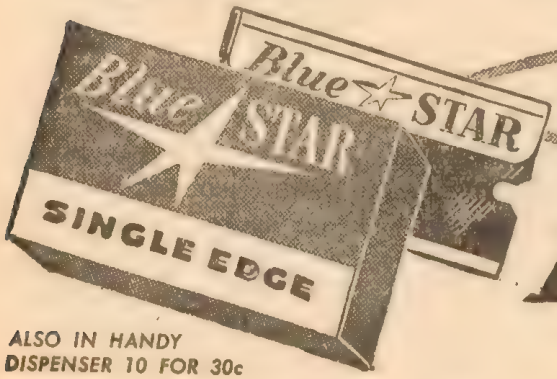

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"I was out of town last night, but I been getting stories on your shooting ever since I got back. I might as well get yours."

Dave gave it to him briefly. "I suppose it differs some from Wyland's," he concluded.

"It differs some from all the others that I've heard, except a few. Most say they didn't see a thing. But Old Man Wyland managed to save himself a pack of witnesses. If I'd been you, Dave, I'd of rounded up a few myself."

"I didn't know a man required witnesses when he shot to save his life. That's all I was doing. I don't suppose I could expect much else just now, though."

"I don't suppose you could, so on account of that I'm going easy. Old Man Wyland wants you thrown in jail. There's others would like to see you in there, too, but I made them understand I represented all the county. I told them I'd have to conduct a long and thorough investigation. This may blow over in the meantime if you're careful."

"How about that Wyland cowpoke, was he hurt bad?"

"Bad enough. That's why I come as early as I did. If that one dies I'll have to come again and lock you up. That is, I will if Wyland's crowd don't get you first. I just come from there."

"I'd sure like to get a look at young Jeff's face today."

"I would too. They wouldn't let me see him, though. Old Man Wyland said you damaged him so bad he's still in bed. And they got the other hired man, the one with the bad hand, under wraps as well. But they're sore, I tell you; aside from the shooting they're missing thirty head of stock. Taken in the night."

Dave blinked at Curley Rhodes. "You say they was taken in the night? Last night?"

Rhodes gazed at the coffee grounds in the bottom of his cup. "Uh-huh. Sometime last night. Old Man Wyland said, too, that stock had been jumped one time before, but he didn't elaborate much on that, except to say that they were on your side of the Frio. I don't know what he meant by that."

Rhodes cocked his eye at Dave. "Old Man Wyland said that Wes might be able to shed some light on the matter. Where can I find him?"

"Wes?" Dave said it slowly, wondering at the odd unfamiliarity the sound of his brother's name now had for him. "I don't know."

Rhodes didn't linger. As soon as he'd gone Dave saddled and loped toward the sandy ford across the river. Before he came in view of it he half expected to find Old Man Wyland's calves on his side again. But the river flats were empty. Riding down upon the previous point of crossing, he saw only emptiness.

He rode south along the river bank, and two miles below the first ford came upon sign sought. Here the water shallowed again and the many imprints in the sand were clear. From the sloping benchland, the cattle trail stretched onward toward the mountains, and as he swung his horse around, with the thought of following them, the movement of a far-off rider caught his eye.

When he recognized Ygenio pounding toward him from the direction of the ranchhouse he drew up and sat his horse, waiting.

Ygenio was equipped for lengthy and possibly hazardous travel. Saddle bags bulged behind his cantle; water bottles flopped at thongs about the horn; bullet-laden bandoliers crossed heavily upon his chest; a pair of rifles were jammed into a boot made for one. He spoke rapidly, almost frantically.

"We must go, Dave! We must hurry. There is danger here. The little nephew of Abrana, he rides to us from town to say that Wyland's cowboy dies. They will be coming for us soon."

Chapter II

LAIR OF THE OUTCAST BROTHER

THEY followed the trail of Old Man Wyland's calves because it seemed the only thing to do. The thought of running from his own land made for a dull, black rage in Dave Logan. The temper of the town was such that a fair trial was beyond reason. Justice was little more than a spoken word when range war broke.

Coming into the foothills, they paused beneath a pine, swung down and loosened saddle cinches. "We got a good hour and maybe more," Dave said as he rolled a smoke. "It'll take Rhodes at least that long to organize a posse and find this trail."

"Yes, at least," Ygenio said. "The nephew of Abrana explained that he had met Rhodes as the sheriff was returning to the village. So we have a start."

Dave watched the heat waves shimmering above the rolling river vegas. "If we're caught we'll be hung for rustling as well as murder. Now, ain't that something?"

"How so is this?" Ygenio inquired. "How can they hang us twice?"

Logan laughed. "I mean they'll hang us on two counts. Murder's one. And they'll tag us on rustling 'cause our trail's as plain as day among the hoofprints of the cattle. Old Man Wyland'll see they make it stick. Even if we do clear ourselves on self-defense we'll be up against a stone wall on the other."

Ygenio removed his cigarette from his mouth and gazed at it. "I been wondering," he said. "When we come to the end of this calf trail, what will we find?"

"I say we find Wes, given he's dumb enough to stick to it. But I don't think he's that stupid. He must have made arrangements to get rid of 'em, or something."

"You think it is Wes? What of this joke he has?"

"That business at the river? That was no joke. You and me just got caught with the big end of the bag in our hands. Like as not, he got interrupted in his work, that's all."

"Why should he admit it, then? That does not seem smart."

"Why does Wes do anything?" Dave dropped his cigarette and smashed it with his heel. "I know less about him than I do about the man in the moon, but, Ygenio, I'll tell you something. I say Wes is on the running end of this trail we're following. And when we find him we're going to take him in. That's the only chance we got. We'll beat the rustling charge for certain, and we stand a fair shake of getting public opinion in our favor on the other."

They rode upward into the mountain timber. Dave figured that the stolen stock had anyway six hours on them, but he was in no hurry. He wanted to come upon the herd when it was in its bedding ground. He didn't want to risk a running fight that might stampede, and possibly lose, the stock. So the present rate of travel was adequate for what he had in mind.

Morning went to noon and noon to afternoon. The trail kept on winding through the deep, green timber, and in a while the familiarity of this part of it returned to Dave's remembrance. He and his father had come up this way on a hunting trip one time, and though that was a good while back he recalled it well enough to have a picture of the country in his mind. In particular, he recalled a side canyon of the Rio Frio.

"You know," he said to Ygenio, "that side canyon might be worth a look. Remember that? It ain't so far from here, and he might go in there to bed. Good grass and water."

"That is true," Ygenio considered. "I remember that from hunting parties. Perhaps the herd is headed there."

The more Dave considered it the more the notion appealed to him. The Frio River, which coursed its way along the plains

in dull and muddy lethargy, had its origin somewhere in these mountains. Because of the rugged nature of the country the land had little value but for hunting and a wood supply. The character of it was little known to those who dwelt in the valley, for its isolation made of it a land which kept its secrets to itself. Once he was in the deeply hidden canyon, Wes would be safe from nearly anyone; the water leading in serving to obliterate the signs his stock had made in passing.

IT WAS mid-afternoon when Dave discovered pursuit. From a high outcropping he saw the cavalcade riding hard along their trail. He and Ygenio were making a short cut across a lava badland, which course would save them time and distance by eliminating the tortuous meanders of the river, and from this place a considerable portion of the country lay beneath their eyes.

"Rhodes in front," Dave said. "Old Man Wyland, a couple of Wyland's hands; the others must belong to Curley." Dave laughed. "I guess young Jeff ain't the fire-eater he fancied himself to be; it don't look like he made the trip today."

"Six of them," Ygenio said.

Watching those below them disappear, then re-appear again, Dave thought it out. He and Ygenio still had a fair lead, but nothing like what he'd thought they had. Rhodes had found their scent with the skill and instinct of a coon hound. If those down in the valley kept to the winding Frio's course the lead would stretch again, but a sharp eye noting the abrasions on the rocks would bring them to the badlands.

The sharp eye in that valley asserted itself in another fifteen minutes. The two above continued through the badlands, now holding those below in view, now losing them again. But as the posse paused for consultation Dave had a look at them between two spires of granite. So sharp were they in the clear and rarified air that he could see the gestures of their arms; from the attitudes of their bodies he had a notion of their states of mind. Old Man Wyland thrusting his arm toward the limb of the split which climbed the rocks; Curley Rhodes attentive, but insistent on the cattle trail. The others gabbing, stretching their necks about, peering here and there, and drawing rifles out of saddle boots.

Old Man Wyland won. Old Man Wyland in his determination to pursue the unknown through the badlands, though why he left the trail of his cattle Dave couldn't imagine. It seemed almost that revenge for humiliation took precedence over the recovery of his stolen property. Dave knew it was in Old Man Wyland's character to do a thing like that. He knew, too, they wouldn't have a chance if they were caught.

They rode harder now. Hate for Wes was a blue-white flame in Dave Logan's consciousness. The stark injustice of this whole occurrence was of such magnitude that his feelings could not grasp it all at once.

Without warning Dave saw Wes. He saw the badlands plunge away toward the Frio valley below. So precipitous was this abrupt ending of the lava that only deep blue sky extended out in front of them. And standing head and shoulders in the sky was Wes.

Dave couldn't believe his eyes. It was a part of this disbelief that made him act and think about it later. His anger was translated into a plunging twist for the staghorn gun-butt at his side.

But Dave, in one galvanic move, swung his horse broadside to Wes and wrenched his gun from the holster on his leg. Wes's silken motion was so smooth it was not obvious. In the second of Dave's drawing Wes was twenty feet away, but in the second of Dave's aiming, Wes's horse was crushing into his and Wes's gun was chopping in a swift arc at his wrist. As Dave's gun clattered on the granite underfoot, Wes

backed off and turned his gun on Ygenio, who simply sat there, staring.

"All right," Wes said quietly. "Let's get down and talk. We got the time. Not much, but enough."

Chapter III

END OF THE TRAIL

DAVE held his aching wrist between his knees and blistered the air with profanity. Wes idled in the shadow of the vast monadnock and picked at his teeth with his fingernail. Ygenio sat stolidly at the base of it and watched them both.

"Davey boy," Wes said, "what you doin' up here? What you lookin' for?"

Dave worked the fingers of his injured hand. "I guess you know. Nobody ought to know better. We're goin' to the box canyon."

Wes toyed with one ear absently. "Everybody seems to be goin' in there today; danged if that don't beat the drum. After Wyland's cattle, huh?"

"And you," Dave said. "We're in a hell of a jam back home 'cause of you and Wyland's beef. I'm going to bring you all in."

"That's pretty big talk from a feller that ain't in shape to back it up. They name you for the rustlin'?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. Likely did, though. We followed the cow trail and these behind followed us." Dave hesitated, then let the whole thing out of him; the gunfight at the ranchers' meeting, the reason he'd egged young Jeff Wyland on. He wanted to hurt Wes, and pay him off in kind.

"Jeff didn't fight, like I figured he wouldn't; but a pair of Old Man Wyland's wranglers did. One of them is dead of it."

It was hard to tell what was going on behind Wes's mocking eyes. When he spoke it was in a quiet voice. "Well, you've come to manhood in a hurry, it appears. I guess you really want them calves, don't you?" Rolling up a smoke, and lighting it, Wes flipped his match down the steep incline dropping toward the Frio. "You don't want to underestimate Jeff Wyland, kid."

"I want them cows," Dave said. "I don't give a damn about Jeff Wyland and never did. I just want them cows."

Wes blew smoke in a tight spurt. "And me, huh?"

"All right, and you, too. Maybe not now, but some time."

"You're convinced it's me, huh?"

Dave thought before he spoke, then nodded. "Yeah. I'm satisfied."

Wes studied the tip of his cigarette with care. "All right, that suits me. I guess you earned them cows. They're in the box canyon, like you figured. Go and get 'em."

Dave stood up warily and Wes remained on his haunches with his shuck burning down toward his finger. "You don't mind if I take my gun along, do you?" Dave said.

Wes reached for it and flipped it up to Dave, who caught it; he held it in his hand, not moving. This would be so easy, he was thinking. He could beat Wes to it this time without half trying. What in hell was holding him from doing it?

Wes's eyes filled with mockery again as he caught Dave's train of thought. "I guess you could if you really wanted to, kid," he said. "But I'll wait for you. You see about them cows; I'll be up here with Ygenio."

Ygenio nodded thoughtfully at Dave. "It is all right. I will stay. Wes declares that he will wait, and I believe him."

"It won't be simple waiting," Wes said, standing up. "You gave me some things to think about. Aside from that, we got company on the way, but you'll have to straighten out your end before we can talk business with 'em."

"I don't get it," Dave said.

"Have a look in the canyon and you

will; but don't take all day about it. If a scrap develops up here we can't hold out forever."

Dave got going in a hurry. He swung his horse around, turned the stirrup and climbed aboard. As he put the animal into the steep descent he glanced back once more and saw Wes and Ygenio taking their rifles from their scabbards. Then he lost sight of them and the shuddering pounding down the incline demanded his attention. He was nearly on the valley floor when he heard the gunfire break out sporadically above him.

THE box canyon opened out of the Frio valley nearly a quarter of a mile from the point where Dave came out upon the river, and on the opposite side from the one that he descended. A hundred yards from this small opening he dismounted, pulled his rifle out and went ahead on foot.

As the canyon opened up in front of him, he went in underneath a protruding shelf of rock and found a place where he might have a look inside. Through a cleavage in a frost-split boulder he saw Old Man Wyland's cattle grazing on the deep and verdant grass which floored the canyon bottom. This canyon was too deep in the mountain country, too difficult of access, to be put to use for ordinary grazing, but the vast quantity of chips and hoofprints told Dave that it served frequently as a stopping place for those who rustled cattle down below. Like as not a way station on the route to the open plains beyond the mountains.

As he was about to move he noticed a saddled horse grazing by the calves, and near-by the lifeless body of a man.

Moving on, he ducked down behind a boulder at the edge of the canyon entrance. Here he met rifle fire from an outcrop in the canyon's center.

He had to try for the creek. He scuttled low across the stretch of grass between him and the water.

With the first of the shooting Old Man Wyland's cattle had stirred and rolled uneasy eyes. Now, as the firing increased from behind the canyon outcrop, they commenced to drift.

Leaving his rifle against the bank, he hunched up and ran, stooping, toward the rocks. When he had threaded through them he found himself beneath a shield of huge, coarse stones, a sort of flanking bastion of the main formation.

It was quiet behind the rocks. Then, coming around the wide arm of the outcrop, he saw him. They were maybe thirty feet apart and their seeing of each other was simultaneous.

Both guns exploded. Dave wasn't conscious of drawing his gun and pulling the trigger, but he was doing it. He saw only the quick, primitive fear leap into this man's eyes, the long, black barrel snap upward and the stab of flame. The man turned and took a few steps away from Dave. He had the appearance of one very weary, and as he went down slowly his face composed itself along more natural lines. As he lay full length upon his side Dave recognized Jeff Wyland.

DAVE was going through the canyon entrance to get his horse and join the others when he saw them coming down the incline from the lava badlands. He was filled with shame and Wes, first to cross the river bottom, rode up and spoke.

"Well?" was all Wes said.

"It was young Jeff Wyland," Dave said quietly, and moved his arm in a vague way toward the canyon. "He's in behind them big rocks."

"Uh-huh," Wes said. "I could have told you that, but it seemed best you should find that out yourself."

Dave felt suddenly belligerent. "You want me to eat crow, is that it? I had reasons to think the way I did."

"I know you did. That's the way I planned it."

Wes didn't elaborate on that just then because the others came down and crossed the river. Ygenio had himself a smile to wear, but the rest of them appeared deflated. Wyland's face had a withered look.

Going into the canyon once again, Dave rode alongside Wes and they had quiet in which to talk. "You should always send a thief to catch a thief," Wes said presently. "That's what the Canadian River people thought, anyway."

"What's the Canadian got to do with it? That's a long way from here."

"I know, but Frio stock was finding its way up there . . . with a lot of Canadian River stuff mixed in. There seemed to be a tie-up."

Dave had a hard time assimilating it. "You're working for those people, is that it? And you come here to get the answer?"

"Uh-huh. They gave me this chance to go straight up there and I took it. I had this idea about getting Frio stock out of the valley. I just thought how I'd do it if I was working this range, and I just naturally wound up here."

"What about young Jeff Wyland?"

Wes rolled a smoke before he answered. "That's kind of complicated, but once I found out how the stock was moving out I had to find someone to do the moving. I don't think I really had an idea about him until he tried to move some of his old man's off to allay any suspicion that might by chance come his way. I caught him."

"Was that down there at the river? You said you'd done that."

"I did. Anyway, I helped him. He brought them down there at night, got 'em over on our side, then I hopped up to him. To tell you the truth he was flabbergasted. I guess he figured we were both working the same ten square yards of territory. I let him think that and we made a deal."

Wes paused and let his eyes wander along the canyon walls as he organized his thoughts. "The thing was, he was scared. He had an idea his old man was onto him and he had a pretty delicate timing schedule. He'd figured to get them calves into the hills during the night, then skip back home and show himself around. So he had to take a chance on me; he simply presumed on my rep and gave me the breakdown, saying he'd cut me in for silence. So, I said I'd run them to the hills, and sent him home. He must have had a fit when he looked out there in the morning and saw them sitting on our land. He had to cry 'wolf' then, 'cause he couldn't head them for the hills in broad daylight. That's when you got into it."

"You'd have saved me a lot of grief if you'd done it like you said you would."

"I know, but I wasn't sure if he would do me honest. I didn't hanker for no trap up in the trees somewhere. And your telling me about the scrap in town, and all the big talk and swagger, confirmed this suspicion I'd had. Anyway, I wanted him to do it. I had the idea he'd take 'em to the canyon sooner or later and I had to get him up in there. That's the way it worked out, kid. He brought 'em over again last night, only that time I trailed him. He had a feller posting guard out near the entrance, and I got to him, then I went up in the badlands to await developments. Young Jeff was bottled up in the canyon and couldn't budge."

"You make it sound so damned easy."

"Maybe it was easy, for me," Wes said. "I figured you could take it, though."

Dave was sitting easy now. They were coming to the place where Jeff Wyland lay on his side and he felt a whole lot lighter inside than when he'd walked on out of there before. "I took it," he said. "But I hope you won't do that often."

"I won't. I'm staying close to home now. The Canadian people said if I cleared up their end of this they'd drop all charges they had. So now I'm going to help you raise good cattle."

THE END

When Ed joined the posse pounding along bank robbers' trail, he had yet to learn that he was riding stirrup to stirrup with the very renegades he hunted!

He waited for them to close so he could tear them apart with buckshot

Outlaw by Demand

By JAMES SHAFFER

ED LUCKABEE had his mind on his own troubles, so he only half heard Paw Wallins' gossip.

"Heard the latest, Ed?" Paw prattled. "Jake Smiley's back in town."

"Oh?" Ed wasn't thinking of Smiley. His mind was on old Cyrus Gault—the biggest man in the county. Gault, the richest, the most overbearing and the most hidebound. And the biggest stockholder in Ladderville's bank.

Ed dropped from the high seat of his wagon and slipped the bridles from his team. It was Saturday morning and he

wouldn't be using the team till after the dance that night.

"Evidently you ain't heard," Paw went on, nettled at Ed's indifference. "Jake Smiley hit 'er rich. He's sporting around town like a millionaire."

"Good for Jake," Ed grunted. He'd like to have had some new clothes. When a man's just turning twenty-six and courting heavy, clothes can mean a lot. But it looked like he'd be wearing these old jeans for a long time to come.

"I thought Jake Smiley was a friend of yours?" Paw asked grumpily. "Why before he left town a year ago—"

"We were neighbors," Ed told him a little wearily. "And we did a lot of talking because we were both having our troubles with Cyrus Gault. But Jake got tired of bucking the old man and pulled stakes."

"And now he's back—and he claims he's gonna bankrupt Gault!" Paw played his trump card. It caught Ed's attention, all right, but he couldn't keep from showing his interest now. That was all Paw needed, and he started talking.

Smiley had hit town two days ago. Him and another fellow. Both dressed fit to kill. Jake scattered money like a bull pawing dirt. Gold pieces. And if his change was under five dollars, he let 'er lay.

He wasn't backward telling how he got it, either, or what he aimed to do with it. He'd struck it rich in the Black Hills of Dakota; sunk his pick into one of the richest finds in the hills. Him and his partner —fellow named Hickman—had worked the claim for a while, then sold out for more money than they could ever spend.

"Somebody asked Jake why he ever come back to a place like Ladderville with all that money in his pockets," Paw went on. "Old Cy Gault was standing 'bout five feet away when Jake gave the man his answer:

'I come back to bankrupt the man that bankrupted me', Jake says, loud and fancy. 'I was just a honest rancher trying to keep body and soul together. But they was one stingy, greedy gent in this county who hates to see anybody else make a dollar. And he busted me. Well, gents', Jake goes on, 'Things is gonna be different from now on. Just you wait and see.' "

"That sounds like Jake all right," Ed agreed soberly. "Even though—"

Then he clamped his lips tight. It would do no good to say what was on his mind. If Jake Smiley was out to bankrupt Cy Gault, that was between the two of them. But Ed knew a few more details about Jake Smiley's bankruptcy than most. Actually, he knew Smiley had made enough money to pay off his mortgage. But Smiley liked wine, women and song too much. And they cost money. Smiley had spent his money on them, though, and Cy Gault had foreclosed.

Well, that was life, he thought as he walked off. Jake Smiley bought himself a good time with his money. Ed had put his back in his ranch. When the going got rough, Smiley had simply quit and went chasing his luck. Now he was back with a poke full of money.

And he, Ed Luckabee, was right where he'd been a year ago. Still struggling to get his ranch going; still fighting Cy Gault every step of the way.

HE PAUSED at the corner of the livery, looking toward the 'Paris Style Shop.' A talk with Doris might buck him up for what lay ahead. She was a level-minded girl in the face of trouble, and yet could make the tough things seem lighter.

On the other hand, he knew she'd bring up the subject of getting married the minute she saw him. And he'd stubbornly set his mind to postpone the wedding till his ranch was a paying thing. He prided himself on his stubbornness, but lately he'd begun to waver in the face of her arguments. So he turned toward the bank. Horace Merker, the teller, was in his cage as Ed entered. He didn't speak to Ed, just swung

his eyes toward the door of John Drago's private office, and made a sign signifying good luck. Ed grinned and opened the door.

His grin left him, though, at the sight of Cy Gault already in the office. He could tell by Gault's face that his last hope was gone. John Drago, the banker, was behind his desk, as usual. He made a pyramid of his fingers and looked over it at Ed. Gault swung around at the sound of the door.

"So there you are!" Gault almost shouted. "With your dang jaw shoved out like a long-eared stubborn mule!"

Cyrus Gault was past sixty. He'd come to this country in his teens to trap beaver. He'd stayed on to hunt buffalo and fight the Indians who tried to stop their slaughter. And when the last of the buffalos were gone, Gault had bought a small herd of cattle and set back to become rich. He made more money than he knew what to do with, and more temper than he could handle.

"Play along with old Cy and you'll get rich," ran the saying in Ladderville. "Buck him and go broke."

Ed Luckabee was bucking him, and Ed was going broke.

"Sometimes I wish you were about forty years younger, Gault," Ed said in a tight voice. "I'd teach you not to call a man a jackass."

"You couldn't teach a grasshopper to spit!" Gault flashed back.

Ed had to hold himself in as he walked past the oldster to face John Drago. The banker looked uncomfortable. He had started this bank with his own money. And for a couple of years, it had been a nice place to deal. Then like everything else in the county, it had come under Gault's rule. From then on, it followed the Ladderville creed: "Humor Gault and get rich. Buck him and go broke."

"Drago, you looked my place over last week," Ed said. "You saw what I'm doing. Did you ever see a finer stand of alfalfa?"

"And fenced in!" The last was a roar from Gault. "Fenced in like the earth belonged to you, 'stead of the Almighty that made it!"

"I had to put up the fence to save the crop," Ed explained patiently, just as he had done a number of times before. "I'm raising it for winter feed—"

"Bob wire!" Gault snorted. "The devil's creation, mister! The range in this country is open and free! I told you I wouldn't stand for bob-wire!"

"Three years ago every rancher in these parts lost half their herds because they lacked winter feed," Ed snapped back. "The wild hay crop failed—"

"That's nature's way, and there's nothing any mortal man can do about it!" Gault snorted. "That's the trouble with this younger generation! They can't take it when the going gets rough! When nature hands 'em the dirty end of the stick, they start whining about their bad luck!"

Ed clamped his lips tight, knowing the futility of further argument. It was Gault's favorite subject. He turned to Drago. He knew Drago was aware of the value of the thing he was trying to do. To raise a crop of alfalfa in a dry summer, by the use of irrigation. This summer was dry, and all signs pointed to continued drought. The wild hay crop along the river bottoms was meager; not nearly enough to see the herds through the winter. Ed's crop would help—if he were allowed to harvest it. And it would point the way for future years.

"What about it, Drago?" he asked.

"The bank made you a loan for the purpose of buying a range bull," Drago said in his dry voice.

"And I spent it on barb-wire, water-pipe and alfalfa seed. It's common knowledge."

"The loan was made under the same provisions as all our loans," Drago said. "That you weren't to spend it on wire. You—ah—know how Mr. Gault feels—"

"So this winter the ranchers lose stock again. Is that it?"

"What if they do?" Gault broke in. "It ain't no skin off your nose. Nobody in these

parts is going to starve. I'll tide 'em over."

"Sure, when they get hard up, they run to you for help," Ed said bitterly. "You'll give 'em help all right, because you get a kick out of bossing people—"

"Now, Luckabee," Drago cut in hastily. "Mr. Gault and I have talked this over. Your note is due in thirty days. It'll be extended if your fence comes down."

"My hay will be cut and cured by then," Ed ground out. "And—"

"You better not cut that hay!" Gault warned. "Once folks see you do it—they'll all try it. Why, a man won't be able to walk home without killing himself on that wire!"

"Just the same, I'll cut and stack my crop," Ed said stubbornly. "I'll lose my ranch doing it, but come winter, the ranchers will see that it makes good sense. They'll see that you've been wrong, Gault!"

"Just plain stubborn!" Gault yelled at him. "Stubborn enough to lose your ranch—just to prove you're right!"

"And to make you eat your words!" Ed flung out and jerked the door open. As he passed the teller's window a dapper dressed man stepped away from it and grabbed his arm.

"Ed! Don't you know your old uncle! Don't tell me you've forgot your Uncle Sam!"

ED STARED at him. He had an uncle, all right. Named Sam Luckabee. Ed hadn't seen him in twelve years. Time enough to forget what a man looks like—except he knew this wasn't his uncle.

"You got the wrong man, mister. I—"

"You're Ed Luckabee, ain't you?" the man hastened on. "Then you're my nephew—the gent I'm looking for. Course I don't look like I used to," he laughed. "I've got older and richer. I hit it rich in California. Decided to travel around and see some of my kinfolk. I hit town last night and heard you needed money."

"Look—uh—Uncle Sam—or whatever your name is—" Ed tried to pull away, but the man stayed with him. Drago and Gault had come out of the office and were watching.

"How much you need, Ed? I got the stuff to burn. I been trying to find out from the teller, but he won't tell me."

"I got a note for eighteen hundred," Ed admitted, "but—"

"Hey, you!" the man thrust money through the wicket. "Gimme my nephew's note. Here's your money. Count it, sonny, and if there's any over, keep the change."

Horace Merker just stared at the pile of hundred dollar notes. It was Drago who finally went to the safe and got the note. He cancelled it and shoved it through the wicket, not even bothering to count the money.

"Looks like you'll harvest your hay and keep your ranch after all, Ed," Drago said in his dry voice. Ed caught one glimpse of Gault's face before the oldster stomped back into the banker's office. And it was the look on Gault's face that kept him from arguing about the thing any more. Whatever was the cause of this thing, he could enjoy it for the moment. He followed his bogus uncle outside.

"I don't know what your game is, mister—"

"Then come down to the hotel and find out," the man answered with a grin. "I was just following orders," he added as they walked along. "I was told to put on that act."

"But the money—?"

"Come up to the third floor," the man said as they passed through the lobby, "and you'll find out why."

Jake Smiley was the reason why. He boomed a greeting as they came in and slapped Ed on the back.

"Kinda puzzled, huh, Ed? Figgered you would be. But I also figgered you'd let Jack Morse here put the deal over—knowing how you hate old man Gault."

Jake Smiley was a big, florid-faced man.

He had a hearty manner, a ready laugh, but somehow his eyes didn't go with the rest of him. They were shifty and he wouldn't look straight at you. You would think he was going to look you straight in the eye, then the eyes would slide away.

"So this is your way of fighting Gault, huh?" Ed asked. "Going behind his back."

"Now, wai-it-a minnit, Ed! You'll admit there was nothing crooked about it."

"No-o."

"All right then." Smiley was mollified. "What I did was just the first trick I pulled against Gault. But it was the one I like the best. I know how you've been bucking the old hellion for four years. Trying to do things your way—and him trying to make you knuckle under like he'd made all the rest do. Put yourself in my place, Ed. If you'd hit it rich like me—wouldn't you have done the same?"

"Guess so," Ed admitted. "But I'm no better off than I was. I still owe eighteen hundred dollars. I just changed creditors."

"Forget it!" Jake boomed. "Owing me ain't like owing Gault. You c'n pay me any time you git ready and run your place to suit yourself. What could be better?"

Ed had to admit that it was pretty fine. After four years of bucking Gault, it was as if a great weight were lifted from his shoulders. He'd never cared for Jake Smiley as far as that was concerned, but he could see the way Smiley felt about it. Gault had forced him out; practically run him out of the country. Jake's luck had changed and he'd struck it rich. It was natural that he'd come back to square accounts with Gault.

"He's been the big augur in this county long enough," Smiley boomed. "When he cracked the whip—everybody jumped. Well, Ed, that's gonna change. I got money enough to break him. Before this is through, I'll cut him down to size. Savvy?"

ANOTHER man came in then, and winked at Smiley. He was of the same breed as Frank Morse. Flashy dressed.

"Everything's set, Jake," he said and poured himself a shot of whiskey.

"Another deal on." Smiley grinned at Ed. "This is Hickman, my other partner. Frank Morse is my partner, too, but he's working for me under cover just for the present."

"Playing as my uncle, huh?" Ed still didn't know whether he liked that or not. But then—what could he lose? He shrugged it off. They talked a while about old times, then Smiley stood up.

"I know Doris is waiting for you, Ed. So I better not keep you any longer."

"She'll be right pleased," Ed agreed, moving toward the door. "It means we can plan on getting married soon."

"You been plenty stubborn about that marriage," Smiley chuckled. "Stubbornness is your strong point."

"I said I'd get married when my ranch was free of debt," Ed told him. "All I'm doing is keeping my word."

"You'll be taking her to the dance as usual tonight, won't you?" Smiley asked, as he led him to the door. Ed said he would and they shook hands and parted. It seemed a little strange for Smiley to ask about the dance, but he forgot it as he hurried to the Paris Shop. Mrs. Adams, who owned it, smiled gaily as he came through the door.

"We've heard the news, Ed. Nothing like having a rich uncle show up at the right time. Dorie'll be right out. She's putting the final stitches on a dress." She paused, but couldn't keep the question from coming. "When's the wedding?"

"As soon as I pay my uncle what I owe him," he said and Mrs. Adams made a face.

"Still stubborn, aren't you?"

"I told you he would be," Doris said, coming out of the sewing room. "I've got the most stubborn man alive. He's got to do things his way. Come on, Mister Mule, Mrs. Adams has given me the rest of the day off."

"I almost poked somebody for calling me a mule a while ago," Ed grinned. "But from you, it sounds good."

The dance lasted till midnight, and then Ed and Doris took their time walking home. They were sitting on the porch swing making plans for the wedding, when they heard the muffled boom from up town.

"Gunfire," Ed muttered. "Some drunk—but no—it didn't sound like a gun—"

Yells and shouts were swelling to a loud chorus. They made out Sheriff Latham's hoarse voice shouting orders as they hurried up the street.

"The bank!" somebody bawled. "Somebody just blowed the safe and cleaned the bank—"

"They headed north! Probably toward the badlands!"

Ed said a hurried good-bye to Doris and ran to the livery stable. He had no saddle horse in town and he was too late to get one at the livery; every one already being taken by possemen. He watched the sheriff lead his men out of town, then walked to his wagon. He might as well go home.

For five miles he followed the same road the bandits and posse had taken. But at Overhand Rock the trails forked. One leading straight into the badlands—and the other due north to his little ranch.

Overhang Rock was just what the name implied. A huge rock formation that hung over the road at the fork of the trail. Ed stopped there and rolled a smoke, ear cocked for the sound of gunfire from the badlands. There was none, however, as he thumbed a match into flame.

His wagon jolted heavily as something dropped into the bed behind him. He whirled around as another and then a third jolt followed. He saw the shadowy forms of three men, and the glint of starlight on sixgun barrels.

"Take it easy, Ed," Jake Smiley laughed. "We're riding a ways with you."

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"So that's it, huh?" Ed sputtered. "I thought something—"

"Shut up," Hickman snapped and searched him for a gun. "No gun," he reported to Smiley and Morse. "Just a shotgun and four shells on the seat beside him."

"Like you said, Ed, this is it," Jake Smiley laughed. "No better cover-up while you're planning a holdup than to pose like rich men."

"And this is your way of breaking Cy Gault, is it?" Ed grunted sourly. He looked up at Overhang Rock, seeing clearly what the bandits had done. They'd left their horses here, climbing straight from the saddle to the rock itself, and thus leaving no footprints. The horses had been driven on, making a trail into the badlands. The posse would follow that trail, while the bandits would slip through the dragnet.

"Drive on, Luckabee," Morse ordered, shoving his gun against Ed's neck.

"NO NEED to git rough with Ed," Smiley chuckled. "He's on our side. He's got no hankering to see Gault git his money back. Eh, Ed?"

Hot words bubbled to Ed's lips, but he held them back. His mind was in a turmoil. What Smiley had said about Gault's money was right. He saw the gunnysack in Jake's hand. As far as Ed went, Gault's money meant nothing to him. The man had too much of it, and he used it the wrong way. Still—he broke his thoughts off, slapped the reins on the rumps of his team and the wagon lurched ahead.

"Looks like I'm on your side whether I want to be or not," he said finally, forcing a laugh into his voice. "What's your plan, Jake?"

Hickman and Morse growled at Jake to shut up, but Smiley merely laughed. "We hole up at your place about a week, Ed. Nobody'll be looking for us there. They'll be searching the badlands."

"And in a week or so you slip out the country, huh?"

Smiley jerked his head around. "I'm out to break Gault, remember? No! We don't leave in a week! We go back to Ladderville. By that time Gault will have sent out for more money for his bank. That's where you come in, Ed. You'll find that out for us. Then we clean it again. Only this time it'll be easier."

"Nice plan," Ed said, but he had to force the words out. At every jolt of the wagon, he could feel Morse' gun at his neck. It reminded him that even though Smiley felt safe with him, his two partners did not, and that he was in a tight fix.

Still, he argued to himself, all he had to do was obey orders and stay in line, and he'd be all right. What happened to Gault's money was of no concern to him. It was only that morning, he thought, that Gault had given the order that would have bankrupted him. Except, he thought wryly, for the assistance of the very men in this wagon, he would now be a ruined man.

"Whip up the horses a bit, Ed," Smiley said. "We want to get to your place before daylight, so we can be inside."

Ed shrugged and did as he was told. His ranch was hard against a high mesa, and it was possible that some of the posse might be riding the top of that mesa. With field glasses, they could look down on Ed's cabin and see that he had visitors.

He thought of the rocky stretch of road ahead, and of the tender feet of his team. If he did it properly, he could lame his team on that stretch and slow them down enough to be after daylight getting home. Then he reminded himself sternly of the fix he was in. Hickman and Morse were tough customers. If they got suspicious, even Smiley's influence might not save him. And what did he care about Gault's money, anyhow? He sat up straight and guided the team carefully around the rocky stretch, saving their hoofs.

They still had half an hour of darkness left when they got home. Smiley jumped to the ground, leaving Ed free on the seat. He

started to twist around. Hickman swore loudly and jammed his gun against his neck again.

"Smiley, you may be big enough fool to trust this hombre, but I ain't!"

"You're the fools!" Smiley retorted. "Why do you think I paid Ed's note for? So he'd string with us. After all, he's going to town and find out when the new money shipment comes in."

"I don't like that plan!" Morse argued. "I'm for leaving with what we got. Doing it your way means trusting Luckabee."

The argument continued as Ed unhitched the team, and they walked to the house. As for Ed, he was trying to keep his mind from working; trying not to think of the layout of his house. Trying to tell himself that Gault's money meant nothing to him.

Ed had sunk six years' savings in his little ranch. Six years of hard work—with nothing but dreams to keep him going. Dreams of the day he'd have his own ranch and run it the way he wanted. The open range was on the way out. It was a thing of the past over most of the west already, with fences such as his to hold a man's herd on graze—and to save his hay crop. Ranchers in other parts of the west were raising hay such as he was trying to do; and thus never knew a year they lacked winter feed.

That was Ed's dream; the same as it was of every forward looking rancher. But Cyrus Gault was of the old breed. He fought the modern things—and he had enough money to make his fights successful. Gault would lose out in the long run. But Ed himself would be licked before that happened. This very morning—yesterday morning it was now—Gault had chopped Ed's dream off short.

AND here he was, Ed told himself bitterly worrying about the old man's money. He was a fool. He could get himself killed if he tried to buck this crew. And what would that get him? Nothing—but something added to the reputation he already had for being stubborn. Be smart, he told himself, and for once in your life, don't be stubborn.

"Okay, everybody inside," Smiley ordered. "From now on the only person who comes outside is Ed."

Ed shrugged and stepped ahead into the cabin. In the half light, he saw Hickman was two full steps behind him. He slammed the door and dived for his sixgun hanging on the wall near the cupboard.

"I told you he couldn't be trusted!" Hickman yelled and slammed into the door. Ed was fumbling fiercely to drag his gun out of leather. The door latch held the first time, but the second time Hickman lunged against it, the door flung open. The bandit fired and Ed felt the slug burn along his shoulder. He made a last desperate effort to get his gun. But the holster was dry and hard, and the gun wouldn't come free. Hickman fired again, and only the dim light saved Ed. He abandoned the gun and lunged for the bedroom door. A bullet hit the door jamb as he went through, showering him with splinters. The bedroom window was high and narrow. Ed left the floor in a diving leap. He felt glass cut him as he went through the window; then he jolted heavily to the ground outside.

Stunned for a moment, he was slow getting to his feet. Buck Hickman wasn't slow. He shoved his gun through the shattered window and fired. Ed felt a hot, numb feeling in his leg. He fought to his feet and lurched around the corner of the house. His leg felt as if it were afire as he ran toward the wagon.

"I winged him!" Hickman yelled. "Git 'im!" Smiley and Morse charged out the front door, their guns hammering at him. Bullets tore dirt at Ed's feet as he reached the wagon and snatched the shotgun. Then the shells—just four of them.

But there was no time to load. They were already racing toward him. He staggered around the barn and limped toward

the corral. His saddle horse was well broken. Maybe he'd stand while he mounted bareback.

Bullets chugged into the corral poles as he climbed through and ran to his horse. The animal whinnied nervously as Ed grabbed his mane and started to swing on.

"I'll stop that!" It was Frank Morse' clipped voice, followed by the blast of his sixgun. The horse gave a convulsive shudder and sank to its knees. Ed scuttled away. Lead sought him as he climbed through the other side of the corral and ran for a ditch. His breath was coming in great sobs as he dropped into the ditch and slipped two shells into the shotgun. He could see the blood welling out of the hole in his leg, and he cursed his fool stubborness.

He'd gambled and he'd lost—all to save Gault's money.

"His leg stopped him," Hickman called. "We'll surround him and move in together."

"Ed, you stubborn fool!" Jake Smiley yelled. "Why'd you do a crazy thing like that?"

But Ed didn't answer. They started in fast, and Ed stubbornly held his fire for them to get in closer. But they didn't.

First Hickman, then Morse and finally Smiley, slowed up and then stopped. They had guessed his plan.

"Waiting for us to git in close enough to tear us apart with birdshot," Jake Smiley said in aggrieved tones. "That's a lousy way to treat me—after all I done for him."

"We've made too much noise and done too much shooting to suit me," Hickman voiced his worry. "I'm for pulling out of here. The posse coulda heard the shooting."

"I reckon that's best," Smiley agreed. "Hitch the wagon up. I know the trail north through a corner of the badlands."

IT WAS daylight now, and Ed could watch Hickman and Morse hitch the team up, though the range was too far for his shotgun. Smiley came out of his cabin carrying the sack of money. In a few more minutes they'd be gone.

Let 'em go, he told himself fiercely. You've done all you could do. And if you tried to sneak in close enough to use the shotgun, they could shoot you down like a dog—let 'em go—let 'em go—

But even as he talked to himself, his hands were busy with his pocketknife. He ringed one of the shotgun shells by cutting almost through the heavy cardboard at the point where wadding separated the gunpowder from the charge of shot. And as he worked, he kept talking to himself.

"You're a fool to try to stop them. If you do they'll get desperate and try to rush you. You're just a stubborn fool—!"

They were getting into the wagon when he finished the job and shoved the ringed shell into the shotgun. He took careful aim, centering his sights on the right front wheel of the wagon. Just before the wagon started to roll, he pulled trigger.

The load of shot from the ringed shell came out in one solid chunk. It had the impact of a cannon ball. Ed could see its flight through the air—a dark blur—then the front wheel of the wagon exploded into a hundred splinters. The team bolted; the wagon almost turned over and the three bandits hit the ground sprawling.

"Grab the horses!" Smiley roared. "We'll ride bareback—"

Ed slipped two fresh shells into his shotgun as he watched the bandits catch the horses and jerk the harness off. Smiley took one horse to himself; the other two rode double. Ed breathed a prayer.

"Horses—forgive me—I'll make it up to you somehow—" and pulled the trigger. The light birdshot hit their rumps and they went into the air bucking like wild broncs. Bareback, the three bandits hit the ground again, and the horses galloped wildly off in opposite directions. Ed got busy with his pocket knife again, as the bandits gathered in a tight group and looked his way.

"I got one last shell!" Ed hollered. "It's

ringed like that first one that busted the wheel. I can get one of you if you rush me —or I can kill the man that reaches down for the money sack."

"Ed, you stubborn fool!" Smliey shouted. "We'll give you a cut—"

"I'm counting to three!" Ed yelled back. "Then I'm firing my last shell. I'll git one of you—which one'll it be—?"

They backed off hastily, leaving the money sack on the ground where Smiley had dropped it. And that's the way things stood when the posse, attracted by the gunfire, rode in.

Ed Luckabee watched the short, quick fight that ended with all three surrendering, from his ditch. And for the first time in his life, he cursed his own stubborness. Because he was right back where he'd been yesterday morning. With a foreclosure notice hanging over his ranch.

Only it didn't work out that way. After the bandits were caught, there was a short palaver, then the sheriff, John Drago and Gault came over to Ed's ditch. Gault's old shoulders were drooping, and his head hung.

"Sixty-five years old," he muttered, "and for the first time in my life, I've got to learn to take a licking. To admit I was wrong."

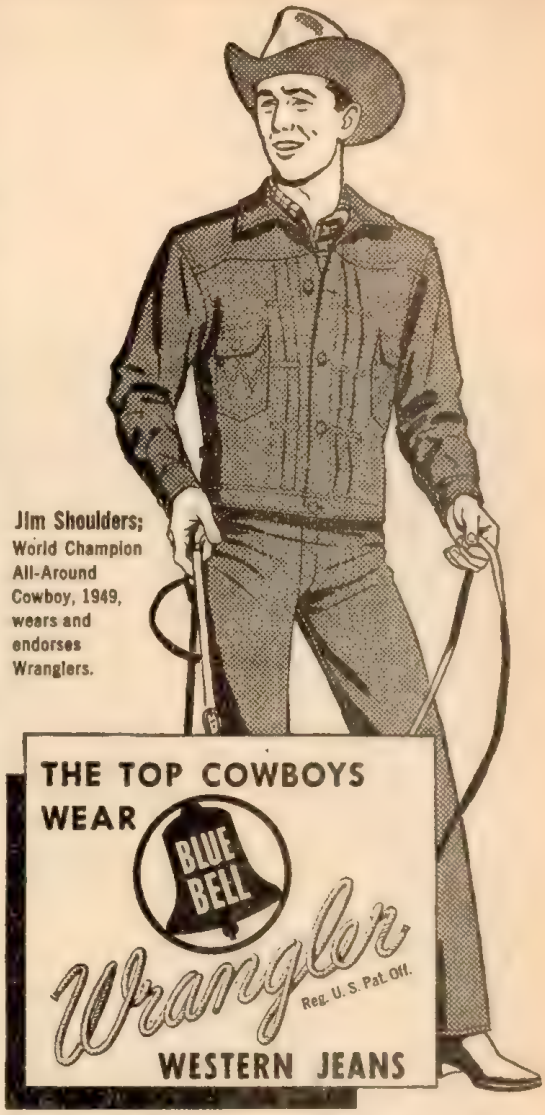
"Huh?" Ed grunted, looking up as the sheriff performed rough first aid on his leg.

"Gault means—" Drago started, but the oldster cut him short.

"I'll do my own talking—and eat my own crow," he growled. "Luckabee—well —anything you want from the bank—just ask for it. And as for the bob-wire—I—I guess I'll git you to show me how to string it. Also how to plant alfalfa."

"You been top dog a long time, Gault," Jake Smiley jeered as a deputy tied his hands. "How does it feel to take a licking and admit you're wrong?"

"It don't hurt a bit," Gault said, swinging his eyes around to Ed. "In fact, it feels right good when the licking comes from—one of the stubborn breed."



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Once a Fugitive—

Dan Maury might better have chosen to remain behind Yuma's grim, gray walls rather than take the freedom offered him—with the best wishes of his deadliest enemy.

Chapter I

SKY-HIGH HELL

PERCHED atop the roaring Colorado's granite cliffs, looming high against the blazing desert sky, the Territorial Prison was called the hell-near-heaven. Six convicts to a cell, the only convenience the floor, the heat like that of a furnace. Filth, disease, insanity, unbearable boredom—humans turned into beasts. Escape? The desert Indians were paid a fifty-dollar reward for tracking down any man

who managed to break out. Survive? A man prayed that he might die.

And suddenly he was out, not knowing why.

It was behind him now, a three-year-long nightmare of a ten-year sentence, but Dan Maury kept saying, sometimes silently to himself and sometimes to his traveling companion, "I'm free? You're sure I'm free?"

He was free, he was on his way home.

He had only to look from the windows of the speeding stagecoach, to see that there

Laurie cried out as Dan's knees buckled

were no iron bars and no guard-patrolled walls. He could have recognized landmarks, for here was country he had ridden as a youth. He didn't need Lew Merritt's word for it—yet he did. He was still dazed by the abruptness of his release.

Lew Merritt chuckled. He reached out and squeezed Dan's skinny leg, and said, "You're free as a bird, Danny. All you've got to do to stay free is play it square with your friends."

Friends? Dan Maury thought.

He supposed he did have friends, Deputy Sheriff Lew Merritt among them. Merritt had come to Yuma for him; he'd made the long trip for no other reason, he claimed, than to give Dan a friendly hand. He was a big, amiable brute of a man, Merritt was. He was thick through the middle, paunchy. His face was flabby, ruddy of complexion. He was never seen without a cigar, and he was smiling around one now, saying:

"You've got to believe it, Dan-Boy. You're out, and you're going to stay out so long as you keep your friends."

He'd been saying the same thing in different ways during the train trip to Prescott and since taking the stage out of there. He kept saying the same thing over and over, like a parrot, until Maury, who'd learned in prison to be suspicious of everything and everybody, wondered what it was that the big man wanted.

His mind was so dulled by the three years of horror that he couldn't think things out nor see what was hidden behind the obvious. All he knew was that he'd been taken to the warden's office, told that he was being paroled, and turned over to Lew Merritt.

The deputy had taken pains to explain that Dan's friends believed that he had spent enough time in a cell. They figured that since he was young, it was only proper to give him a second chance. They had influence, his friends had, and they'd used it in his behalf with the governor at Phoenix.

His friends were Lew Merritt and Frank Carmody, the man who, three years ago, was the prosecuting attorney at Dan's trial. Carmody had returned to private law practice since, according to Merritt. What other friends Dan had the deputy only hinted at, mentioning no names. Dan wondered suspiciously if one of the others might be Cole Hammond.

It was Hammond's bank at Durbin that had been held up and looted of thirty thousand dollars, the crime for which Dan was sent to Yuma. The fact that Hammond had a hand in getting him paroled was no more fantastic than the fact that Merritt and Carmody had used their influence in his behalf.

Friends?

Dan Maury had learned in prison that all men were strangers, and no one was to be trusted.

He looked from the stagecoach now. His appearance was bad; he looked like a man returning from a hell-hole. He looked much older than his twenty-five years. His face was pale, with a sickly pallor, gaunted. There was a nervous twitch at the left corner of his mouth, and he looked as though he would never smile again.

His eyes stared without blinking, but they didn't seem to see much. The stagecoach raced along a road that ran through cattle range. White-faced cattle were scattered over the bunchgrass flats. Occasionally a group of ranch buildings could be seen in the distance.

The stage rolled on and on, passed through some low sage hills, and Lew Merritt said, "Well, we're just about there, Dan."

"Where?" said Dan Maury.

The deputy gave him a sharp look. "Home," he said. And then, anxiously, "There's nothing wrong with your memory, is there?"

IT WAS a typical Arizona town, the older buildings of adobe and the newer ones of unpainted plank. It existed because of the

surrounding cattle country and because of the several mining camps in the near-by hills. Three years hadn't changed it at all, and for all Dan Maury knew the same saddle horses stood at the same hitch racks as on the day Lew Merritt had taken him away to Yuma Prison.

The stage still stopped before the Alhambra Hotel, and the familiar loafers were on the awninged porch to see what passengers were arriving. The loafers grew a little excited at sight of Maury, and began to whisper to one another.

Lew Merritt said at once, "Let's get over to Frank's office, Dan."

Frank Carmody's law office was across the street, over Glennon's hardware store. It was reached by an open stairway at the side of the plank building. The lawyer rose as Dan entered with Merritt, a lean man with a brisk manner and a ready tongue. He came from behind his desk, gripped Dan's hand, said:

"Well, well! Dan, it's good to see you again. Very good. Sit down, take that chair. Cigar?"

It was hard for Dan to believe that Carmody was one of the men who had sent him to prison. No man's character had ever been stained blacker than Dan's had been by Frank Carmody in the courtroom three years ago.

"No cigar?" Carmody said, and for so slight a man he had a powerful voice. It boomed. "You won't turn down a drink, though?"

He laughed, slapped Dan on the back, went to his laden bookshelves, and said, "I always keep a bottle behind Blackstone." He removed a law tome, lifted a bottle from farther back on the shelf. "Nothing like a drink shared with friends. Lew, the glasses are in the bottom drawer of the desk."

Dan found himself sitting in a comfortable leather armchair with a glass of whiskey in his hand. He heard Frank Carmody say, "Here's to the future. May it treat all of us kindly."

Lew Merritt chuckled, said, "Amen," and lifted his glass.

Dan downed his shot, and gasped on it. He felt as though he were strangling. It had been too long since he'd taken whiskey. His eyes were watering by the time he caught his breath. He saw Carmody through a blur. The lawyer was lounging against his rolltop desk. Lew Merritt was sprawled in another of the armchairs, smiling. It was only with his lips that the deputy smiled. His eyes were murky.

Carmody said, "It's like this, Dan. We figured that three years of Yuma was enough. We were convinced that it had taught you a much needed lesson. So we pulled strings and got you paroled. Now it's up to you, wholly up to you."

Dan said, "What's up to me?"

"Not to break that parole."

"How could I break it?"

"Well, you could break it by not doing right by your friends."

Dan stared at the lawyer's thin, swarthy face. It seemed to him that Carmody had a hungry look. A beaklike nose, beady black eyes, and a receding chin gave Frank Carmody a hawkish look. A hungry hawk, Dan thought.

He said, "What do you mean by that?"

Carmody exchanged glances with Merritt, then smiled at Dan. "It was a lot of money," said Carmody. "Thirty thousand dollars. The loot was never recovered. It's still wherever you and Lefty Kane cached it. You're free to go and get it, and enjoy it".

Dan stood up suddenly. "Listen—"

Carmody's heavy voice drowned him out. "You'll have to leave these parts once you've got the money, naturally. My advice is for you to head for Mexico. Of course, you'll need help to get away. Lew and I will give you that help. If you'll pay the price."

Dan had been too long in prison, suffered too much. "What price?" he demanded, his face blank.

Lew Merritt rose, moved closer. "You should be able to figure it out, Maury," he said flatly. "We'll split that loot three ways. One part for you, one for Frank, one for me. That'll leave you with ten thousand, and down in Mexico that much gringo money will keep you in tequilla and señoritas for the next ten years. That's the deal, Maury. Take it, or you'll be back in Yuma so quick you'll never know you've been outside."

Dan couldn't help but understand now. He said, "A couple of tinhorns!" Anger swept through him, the first real emotion he'd experienced in a long time. "A couple of cheap, conniving crooks!" he yelled. "The pair of you can go to—"

Carmody's face turned ugly.

Merritt's amiable look was wholly gone. He moved closer to Dan. "Be reasonable, Maury," he said. "You don't want to go back, do you?"

He didn't wait for a reply. He drove a fist into Dan's belly, all his great weight behind it.

DAN didn't cry out. He merely grunted, then bent over and hugged his middle with both arms like a person suffering severe cramps. The agony showed on his face. Without straightening, he reeled to the wall and sagged against it.

Lew Merritt said, "Now maybe you'll show some sense."

The office door burst open.

A girl clad in men's range clothes rushed into the room, a cry of "Dan!" on her lips. She halted abruptly, startled. Then she said, "Dan!" again, this time without excitement and pleasure. She was quick to understand what was happening here, if not why it was happening. She divided an accusing look between Carmody and Merritt, then strode across to Dan.

She took Dan's arm, said gently, "Come along, Dan. Come along with me."

He straightened, with an effort, looked at Lew Merritt and Frank Carmody. His eyes were no longer dull, but bright with hate. Both men avoided meeting his gaze. The lawyer busied himself with lighting a cigar. The burly deputy scowled deeply at the girl.

She tugged at Dan's arm, said, "Let's get out of here."

He held back an instant, as though not wanting to leave until he had paid back Merritt for that wicked blow. But then he let her draw him to the door. The two men made no attempt to stop them as they went out. Dan descended the flight of steps on wobbly legs.

He said thickly, "Laurie."

She said, "Yes, Dan," her voice husky with feeling, and hurried him toward a buckboard and team standing in front of Doan's general store. She got him into the rig, climbed to the seat, untied the reins from the whipstock. "It's all right now, Dan," she said, and started her team of matched grays. Quite a few people watched the buckboard head out Durbin's main street, and away from town.

The road led north. After perhaps a mile along it, Laurie held the grays to a walk. She looked at the man beside her, wanting to be happy and unable to be.

She said, "I was in Doan's store when somebody said that you'd come in on the stage, Dan. The man said that Merritt had brought you home, taken you to Carmody's office. Dan, Lew Merritt hit you. Why? Why, Dan?"

He told her. He told Laurie Evans, because if he had any friend in this world it was she. She was more than just a friend. Three years ago, an eternity ago, he had been in love with Laurie. It had been understood between them that, when his luck changed, they'd be married. His luck had changed, all right. But from bad to worse, and he'd gone to Yuma Prison.

"So they still believe you were the second man in the hold-up," Laurie said bitterly. "And they had you paroled, hoping to share in the loot."

DAN said nothing. He sat stiffly erect, staring straight ahead, his hands balled into fists as they rested on his knees.

"They won't send you back now?" Laurie asked, frightened.

"They threatened it."

"They won't dare!"

"Men like that will do anything, Laurie. Anything rotten."

She shook her head. "They won't dare," she said again. And added, "I'll make it hot for them if they try it. I'll go to the sheriff and tell him what they tried to make you do."

"They'll say I lied."

"They can't say I'm lying," Laurie said grimly. "They don't know what I might have overheard before I burst into the office. I'll lie to stop them from sending you back, Dan. I'll say that I heard them demand that you divide that stolen money with them."

"Laurie," Dan muttered. "Laurie."

She reined in the team, turned to him, and then they were in each other's arms. The girl cried because of the three years that had been lost to them. The man's face was bleak. It was no good. He was an ex-convict. He would always be that in the eyes of the world. He couldn't ask her to marry him. It wouldn't be fair to her.

They drove on, and now Laurie seemed happier. She hadn't changed much in three years, just grown more mature, more desirable. She was a typical ranch girl, and yet, to Dan Maury, somehow different and far more wonderful than any other girl could possibly be. She was beautiful in his eyes. A tall girl with honest gray eyes, tawny blonde hair, smiling lips. And a loyalty that never wavered.

She had never believed that he had been in on the hold-up. Everyone else had believed it, but not Laurie. She had told him that she would wait until he had served his ten-year sentence; she had said that there

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could be no other man for her, even when he told her not to waste all those years waiting for him.

Her letters had come to him regularly. She had written words to keep his spirits up, though in some letters, especially after the death of her father, she hadn't succeeded in being too cheerful. Sam Evans had died a year before, and since Laurie had been alone at Triangle-E Ranch, except for a couple cowhands, she had tried to do a man's job.

The road forked about seven miles north of town, one branch leading to the Triangle-E and the other to the K Bar M—the two-bit cow outfit Dan had owned in partnership with Lefty Kane. That they had owned except for a tremendous mortgage held by the Durbin Bank. It was the branch to the K Bar M that Laurie now took, and Dan, bewildered, said, "Where are you headed, Laurie?"

She smiled, much like a small girl about to reveal a pleasant surprise. "I'm taking you home, Dan."

"You don't understand," he said. "The bank foreclosed on the K Bar M because Lefty and I couldn't make our mortgage payments."

"Yes. But Dad bought it."

"Sam?"

"I made him believe that you hadn't been with Lefty that day, that somebody else had helped him hold up the bank," Laurie said. "Dad knew you well enough, Dan, to have some doubt about you being guilty. Anyway, K Bar M is still yours and always will be."

"Mine—to buy from you."

"You're not pleased, Dan?"

"I don't know what I am," he said bleakly. "Except that I'm an ex-convict, and that everybody but you will always believe that I was with Lefty that day. Laurie, it's no good. You shouldn't have anything to do with me."

"Please, Dan," said Laurie. "Let me decide what's good for me."

THE PLANK buildings at K Bar M headquarters were in good repair, and the interior of the shack-like ranchhouse was just as Dan had left it. It wasn't much of a headquarters, for most any cow outfit boasted better, but it was home to Dan Maury and, after a prison cell, seemed like a mansion.

They went no farther into the house than the doorway, and Laurie said, "I rode over once every week, to see if everything was all right. I was afraid some squatter might move in."

"I don't know what to say to you, Laurie."

"We don't need words, you and I."

"No, I guess not."

"Let's go to Triangle-E now," she told him. "We'll have supper, then you can have one of my horses when you're ready to come back here. I'll grubstake you, Dan." She really was happy. She clung to his arm.

"I'm not going to plan for you, darling. Stay here a little while, get used to being home, make up your mind what our future shall be. I'll wait. I'll wait until you come courting me—once again."

She made him feel that everything was going to be all right. Until he thought of Lew Merritt and Frank Carmody.

Chapter II

THE ALHAMBRA

IT WAS long after dark when Dan returned from the Triangle-E. He was riding a good dun cow pony. It was saddled with his own rig, which he'd taken to Laurie's place in her buckboard. He was leading a sorrel mare under pack. He'd brought along enough provisions to keep him fed for a couple weeks. Laurie was generous. She'd even insisted that he take a can of coal oil with the grub.

He carried the provisions into the house, then off-saddled the horses and turned them into the corral. In the house again, he filled

and lighted the hanging lamp. He started a fire in the stove against the chill of the night. He put the provisions away in the cupboard, taking his time at it, enjoying it.

The one-room house was clean. Laurie had kept it tidy, not letting the dust gather. The two bunks at the side of the room were made up, inviting. His and Lefty's. Only Lefty Kane wouldn't be there to occupy his. Lefty was dead.

Dan rolled and lighted a cigarette, roamed about, too restless to sleep. He found his gun-rig hanging on a peg at the end of his bunk. He lifted it from the holster, then, after a moment's thought that had to do with Lew Merritt and Frank Carmody, he sat at the plank table and took the gun apart to clean and oil it.

He worked without haste, a part of his mind on other things besides the job at hand. He had problems. Laurie was one. Lew Merritt and Frank Carmody were others. Those two were going to cause him trouble. He knew it. He gave a start as the door swung open. He jumped up so quickly that the bench toppled over, the crash it made explosively loud.

The man in the doorway was a stranger to Dan.

He was middle-aged, of medium height, ordinary of appearance. If Dan had seen him before, he didn't recall where or when. He realized as he stared that the fellow wasn't the sort anyone would particularly notice or long remember. He was almost too ordinary.

He wore the usual flat-crowned Stetson and half-boots with spurs, which should have marked him for a rider. But his gray suit, white shirt and maroon tie suggested a townsman. There was a something about him, however, that hinted that here was a man at home anywhere—on the range or in a city, not belonging anywhere.

"Mister, you'll step right into trouble sometime by walking into a strange house like that," Dan said. "What do you want? Who are you?"

The stranger smiled faintly. "I called out before I walked in," he said. "Nobody answered. I thought you might be asleep. I want a talk with you. My name is—" he hesitated slightly here—"Blake."

"Blake," Dan said. "Why not Smith?"

"Maybe you're not in the mood to talk just now."

"Maybe you're right about that."

Blake considered that, watching Dan narrowly. "Well, I could see you another time, when you're in a talkative mood." He turned as though to leave, then swung back fast.

He wasn't quite fast enough. Dan caught him before he got wholly faced about again, slamming a fist to the man's jaw. Blake's head rocked back, and he lost his grip on the gun he'd drawn from inside his coat. Dan grabbed him, threw him half across the room.

Blake fell against the table, almost toppling it, then slumped to the floor. Dan stooped, picked up the revolver. It was a .38 with a short barrel.

Blake lay there dazed for a moment, then pulled himself up by taking hold of the table. He stood swaying. "You're quick, Maury," he said. "You're quick and you're tough."

"Like I said, you step right into trouble," said Dan, sore but bewildered too. "Now who are you and what do you really want?"

"My name's Blake and—"

"Blake, Blake," Dan mimicked him. "Let's have some truth."

"I'm with the Amberton Agency, Maury."

"A detective. A damn' snoop."

"My firm was hired to investigate the Durbin Bank hold-up three years ago," Blake went on, unruffled by Dan's opinion of him. "Mr. Hammond, who owns the bank, heard that you were being paroled. He got in touch with the agency, and so I was sent here."

"For what?"

"For thirty thousand dollars," Blake said.

A COOL one, this Blake. No matter how he looked, there was nothing ordinary about him. He ignored the gun Dan held pointed at him, and lighted a cigar. Dan broke the revolver, punched out the cartridges, tossed the unloaded weapon onto the table.

"You think I've got that thirty thousand cached away," Dan said. "That's what everybody thinks. And because everybody thinks it, I was paroled from Yuma—so somebody could get their hands on that loot."

"Did Merritt and Carmody try to make a deal with you?"

"Yeah."

"And you?"

Dan frowned at him. It was odd, but he felt good. He was beginning to feel like his old self instead of a jailbird. He had handled this detective, and he felt cocky. He'd be able to handle Merritt and Carmody too, when the time came.

He said, "Me? I didn't go for their deal. Twenty thousand they wanted. Leaving me ten, and giving me some advice about going to Mexico. Listen, Blake, I had nothing to do with that hold-up."

"So you claimed at your trial. Nobody believed you."

"It was the truth."

"Your partner—"

"Sure," Dan broke in. "Lefty Kane was a queer one. When things got tough, he brooded and took to the bottle. We were going to lose the ranch to the bank, and Lefty was drunk for a week. Then he disappeared. He was gone three days, where I don't know.

"It was a stormy night, the third night when he showed up, with a bullet in his back. Dying. He and somebody else—not me—held up the bank. I figure the other hombre double-crossed Lefty, shot him in the back and beat it with the thirty thousand.

"Both were masked during the hold-up, but when the posse showed up and found Lefty dead here I got blamed for being the second man. The bank teller identified me, but he lied. That was my story at the trial, and it's still my story."

Blake was watching him closely. After a long silence, he said, "I come pretty close to believing you."

"Believe me or not," said Dan, "clear out and stay away from me."

"Let's talk a little more, Maury."

"Talk, talk. A lot of good talk does."

"It might clear you," Blake said, showing no signs of being ready to leave. "You'd like that wouldn't you? You want to clear your name, don't you?" He puffed on his cigar, thoughtful. Then: "Let's figure out who the other hold-up man could have been. What friends did Lefty have, besides you?"

Dan considered, then said, "None that I know of. He was a stranger on this range when we teamed up. He never said where he hailed from or mentioned any friends. He seemed like an honest hombre to me."

"The agency checked back on him," Blake said. "He was a wild one in his younger days. Traveled with a tough bunch. Some of the crowd, like Jake Hanlon, turned out real bad. Before becoming your partner he worked as a bartender in that mining camp over in the Coffin Hills—Palisade. It's just a ghost town now, so he couldn't have found somebody there to pull off a bank robbery with him. How long did he live after he got home that night, Maury?"

"About half an hour."

"And he didn't talk in that half hour? No last words?"

"No."

"You're sure of that?"

Dan checked an angry protest against Blake's probing. He'd remembered something. The detective's questions had dredged something out of a deep corner of Dan's memory. It wasn't much, just a name. A name on the lips of a dying man. He didn't mean anything to Dan, but maybe a detective. . . .

Dan said, "How do I know you're what you claim? Maybe you're just another crook hoping to make off with that loot. Let's see some credentials."

Blake nodded, reached inside his coat. Seeing Dan move closer in a wary manner, he said, "No sneak gun, Maury. Just my wallet."

He brought out the wallet, from it produced a card identifying him as Samuel P. Blake, as operative of the Amberton Agency. He also showed Dan a letter written to him by the United States marshal for Arizona Territory.

"Satisfied?" he asked.

"I suppose so."

"Good. Now what about Lefty Kane talking before he died?"

"He didn't say anything much," Dan said. "Just a name. The Alhambra. He said it a couple of times. 'The Alhambra, Dan—The Alhambra.' "

Blake looked bewildered. "It doesn't mean anything to you?"

"No. That's all Lefty said, and that's all I can tell you," Dan said. "There's no use you wasting more time here "

Blake nodded. "I guess you're right," he said. He took his gun off the table, returned it to his shoulder holster. He went to the door, paused there to say, "Keep thinking about it, Maury. If you remember something about a place called the Alhambra, let me know. For your own sake. I'll be in Durbin for a while. You can reach me at the hotel or at the bank."

Dan didn't answer.

He went to the door and watched Blake mount his horse and ride out. The detective headed south, toward town. Closing the door, Dan dropped the bar into place so that no one else could walk in on him. He went back to cleaning his gun, and to pondering Kane's last words. The name meant no more to him now than it had three years ago, but this time he couldn't put it out of his mind.

The Alhambra.

It might help him clear his name, wipe out the stigma of his having been in prison, if he only knew what it meant.

Chapter III

PHANTOM GUN-TRAP

DAN saddled the dun and rode out across the range after breakfast. It was good to be in the saddle again, free to ride wherever he wished. But he knew no real peace of mind. He'd been paroled from prison, not pardoned. That meant that he could be sent back, if the men who had gotten him paroled wanted him back. He was going to have trouble with Lew Merritt and Frank Carmody, he knew, and it would land him back in Yuma.

He felt low in his mind about Laurie too. She's waited three years, she would wait longer—forever—if he were sent back. And that was no good. She should marry, but it shouldn't be an ex-convict. It shouldn't be a man everybody would always remember as a bank robber. She would want children, Laurie would, and it wouldn't do for her children to learn one day that their father had been a jailbird.

He had nothing to offer Laurie.

This range he now rode really belonged to her, as did the horse between his knees. True, Laurie didn't look at it that way. She wanted him to marry her, and then the K Bar M would be joined with the Triangle-E. There would be no question of ownership. He would be boss of the outfit, and Laurie would be content to be a housewife.

He shook his head. He couldn't so much as offer her an unblemished name.

If he should weaken and marry her, and then be sent back to prison, it would be all the more unfair to Laurie. A voice in his mind seemed to whisper, Clear out. Leave this range. Let her find real happiness with some other man.

The voice wouldn't be silenced. It argued

too that flight would save him from trouble with Merritt and Carmody, and keep him from being sent back to prison.

It was mid-afternoon when he got back to his ranch headquarters. There was a pinto pony standing before the house, and Laurie appeared at the doorway when he crossed the yard. He smiled at her as he dismounted, but it was a false smile that masked the bleakness in him.

Laurie said, "I couldn't stay away, Dan. I told myself that I'd better come see if Merritt and Carmody had come to make trouble for you again."

He told her that he'd seen no more of them, and went inside with her. He knew that she expected him to take her in his arms, and saw that she was hurt when he didn't. He took out makings, started a cigarette.

"I had a visitor last night," he said. "A man named Blake."

"Blake? A detective?"

"You know him?"

Laurie nodded. "He came to talk to me a number of times during the past three years, Dan. He urged me to get you to tell where the bank loot was hidden. A deal, he always said. He promised to get you paroled if you returned the money to the bank. I never mentioned it in my letters because—well, because I knew you know nothing about the money. Did he—"

"Get tough? No. I got tough with him."

"Dan, there'll always be trouble, won't there?"

"Yes, Laurie."

"If only we could find out who was with Lefty that day," Laurie said unhappily. "Dan, have you still no idea?"

He lighted his cigarette. "There's only one thing," he said. "Blake made me remember it. It doesn't seem to mean anything. Lefty told me a name just before he died. Not a man's name. It was just 'The Alhambra.' "

Laurie frowned, repeating it. "I've heard of it, Dan," she told him. "But I don't know when or where. It sounds like a Mexican name. Do you suppose—" Suddenly she looked excited. "Dan! There's a sign on a saloon over in that ghost town! In Palisade!"

"The Alhambra Saloon?"

"Yes!"

Dan too felt suddenly excited. "Blake said that Lefty had worked in a saloon there when Palisade was booming," he said. "It might be that Lefty's partner didn't get away with the loot. He could have shot Lefty, meaning to get away with the money, but Lefty managed to stay on his horse and get away. Maybe he hid the money in the Alhambra, and then, knowing he was dying, came here."

His voice trailed away as he heard riders outside.

He and Laurie had been so intent upon working out the puzzle that they were oblivious to all else. They had been caught off guard. They looked at each other in a frightened way, each suspecting that the riders were Merritt and Carmody.

Dan drew his gun, said, "Keep back, Laurie. I'll try to scare them off, but there may be trouble."

He went to the door, opened it, and saw two strange riders reined in, facing him. There was a riderless horse off to one side of them, but Dan didn't see the third man until he stepped from the doorway. The third man was against the wall of the house. He lunged forward as Dan appeared, clubbing down with his sixgun. The barrel struck Dan's wrist. His whole arm numbed with pain, and his gun fell from his hand. The man said sourly, "No shooting, Maury. We're making a friendly call on you."

He was a burly, tough-visaged man. Dan recognized him. Everybody had come to know the notorious outlaw Jake Hanlon.

HANLON'S companions dismounted, came forward. One was a wild-looking youth, the other a swarthy man of fifty. The younger of the pair picked up Dan's

gun, shoved it into his waistband. He grinned at Dan and said mockingly:

"I always heard that hombres grow tough in Yuma." It was an ugly grin.

Jake Hanlon growled, "Inside, Maury."

Dan backed in, silently cursing his own blundering.

They crowded in after him, and he saw how they looked at Laurie. She shrank back, all the way to the fireplace, as though trying to escape their gaze. She was frightened.

Jake Hanlon said, "Don't make trouble for us, Maury. Or for yourself." He was brutish; he had been an outlaw for most of his years, and viciousness was the strongest part of his nature. "You were smart and tough enough to hold out on the law," he went on, "but you're not smart or tough enough to hold out on us. I headed here as soon as I heard you'd been turned loose. Maury, I want that thirty thousand."

"You're making a mistake," Dan said thickly. "I wasn't in on that hold-up."

Hanlon spat on the floor. "I know it," he said. "I was in on it with Lefty Kane. He came to me with the idea, and I threw in with him." He grinned broadly but without humor. "Lefty and I had a little argument over the divvy, and he ran out on me, with all the loot. With a bullet in his back. He came here, and died. The law picked up his trail before I could, and arrested you. But the law didn't get the loot. You took it from Lefty and hid it. And now, damn you, I want what's mine."

"I tell you—"

"Maury, I ain't fooling around."

"I tell you, Hanlon, I never saw that money."

Hanlon's heavy face flushed a dull red. "All right," he said savagely, "it'll have to be the hard way. You'll talk when we get done with you. Kid, Charlie, go to work on him."

Charlie was the swarthy man. "The girl, Jake," he said. "He'll talk quicker if it's her that's being hurt. Don't take my word for it. Try it and see."

Hanlon said, "All right. The girl, then."

Dan lost his temper then, lost it in the fear that swept through him. He lunged at Hanlon, but the outlaw was on guard. Hanlon struck out with his gun, and the barrel thudded against Dan's head. There was an explosion of pain.

Dan's knees buckled, dropping him to the floor. He lay sprawled, his brain reeling. He heard Laurie cry out, and he forced words from his constricted throat.

"Wait!" he said chokingly. "I'll talk!"

He heard Charlie laugh, over by the fireplace, and say, "Easy, wasn't it? What did I tell you?"

Chapter IV

END OF A COLD TRAIL

DAN picked himself up, stood swaying. After a time the giddiness passed but his head hurt like hell. He looked across

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the room, saw that Charlie, a smirking grin on his dark face, held Laurie by the left arm. The hardcase had Laurie's arm twisted behind her, and now, as Dan looked, he applied pressure. Laurie's face stiffened with pain.

"Turn her loose," Dan said, and cursed the man.

Charlie laughed and released the girl. Laurie slowly straightened her arm, still showing pain. Her eyes were tight shut, and she was biting her lower lip. Dan suddenly wondered what sort of a man he was to allow Laurie to be hurt. He'd never felt so helpless.

Hanlon prodded him in the side with his gun. "All right, Maury."

Dan faced him, his eyes ugly. "I never saw the money," he said. "Lefty didn't have it with him when he got here. He hid it over in Palisade, in a saloon where he'd worked as a bartender."

"The Alhambra?" said Hanlon. "He told you?"

"Yeah."

The outlaw was suspicious. "How come you didn't tell that to the law?" he demanded. "You sure you're not giving us the run-around?" He shook his head. "It won't work, if that's your game. You're going to that ghost town with us. You and the girl."

"No," said Dan. "Not the girl."

"You giving me orders, Maury?"

"She's got nothing to do with it."

Hanlon ignored that. "Bring her along, Charlie," he ordered. "Kid, keep an eye on this hombre. Head for Palisade, and I'll keep behind you to see that we're not followed. Come on, Maury—move!"

THE FIVE of them rode northwest across the unstocked K Bar M range, heading for the rock hills in which the ghost town lay. Dan and the Kid led the way, the Kid keeping the horses moving at an easy but distance-consuming lope.

Laurie and Charlie rode close behind them, and Jake Hanlon followed and kept an eye on their backtrail.

It hadn't worked out as Dan had hoped. He'd taken it for granted that the three hardcases would go alone when he told them the loot was at Palisade. He realized now that he should have known better. They couldn't risk turning him and Laurie loose until they were ready to leave the country.

Now, with no certainty that the money was at the abandoned mining town, Dan feared the worst. These three men were apt to go berserk if the loot wasn't found.

The sun was low in the west when they topped a rocky ridge and saw the lifeless town below them. Palisade's boom had ended so abruptly that its people had migrated too hastily to take away more than what could be easily moved. Its buildings were intact but badly weathered and in disrepair. A violent storm or two had battered the town, leaving broken windows, ripped roofs and sagging awnings. It had been a one-street town, with the business places midway along it. False-fronted plank buildings. Over the entrance to one such building was a big sign, its red and gilt paint badly faded, that read: THE ALHAMBRA SALOON.

They reined in before the Alhambra, and for a long moment no one made a move to dismount. Then Hanlon growled, "What's the matter? Afraid of ghosts?" He kept his voice at its normal pitch but it seemed startingly loud in the stillness. There was an eerie quality about a town without people. The tough Kid looked about uneasily.

"I got a feeling—" he began.

Charlie laughed but not very loud.

Hanlon growled, "You've what?"

"A feeling somebody's watching us."

Hanlon spat. "What are we waiting for?" he said, and got down from his horse. "Bring them along."

It was gloomy inside the Alhambra. Dust rose as they crossed the creaking plank

floor. The big barroom was bare of furniture. The bar remained, a long one extending along the right side of the room. A single, dusty, empty bottle stood on it.

Charlie said, "Nothing here."

Hanlon frowned at Dan. "Whereabouts?"

Dan shrugged. "All I know is that Lefty said the Alhambra," he said flatly. "He used to work here." He saw Hanlon's face turn nasty. "Where's the office?"

Hanlon swung away on that, back past the far end of the bar, disappearing through a doorway there. The Kid followed him hastily, apparently afraid to trust the big man out of his sight. Charlie looked as though he wanted to go back there, but was undecided about leaving Dan and Laurie. Laurie suddenly put her hand to her forehead and began to sway.

She said thickly, "Dan, I—I feel sick!" He moved toward her, but she fell against Charlie—And grabbed the man's gun from its holster.

Charlie swore, reached for her, but he'd caught on too late. Laurie eluded him, and Dan, reaching her now, took the gun. He swung on the outlaw, striking out with the long-barreled Colt. Charlie's eyes bulged as he saw the blow coming, and tried to duck.

Dan smashed him twice across the face, to pay him back for having hurt Laurie, and the man screamed. The third blow, to the temple, downed him. Laurie was already in flight, almost to the door, but now Hanlon and the Kid came running from the office.

Dan fired at them, a wild shot, then ran after Laurie.

"Not the horses," he shouted. "They'll shoot us down."

HE caught hold of her hand, and they fled across the street toward a building which once had been a hotel. Dan hit the door with his shoulder and it swung open upon screeching hinges. A gun roared behind him. He heard the slug thud into the wall near the door, splintering the wood.

Laurie was inside then, and Dan turned to fire on Hanlon and the Kid. He saw the skinny figure of the Kid in the Alhambra's doorway, fired and missed, then Hanlon smashed a pane out of the saloon's front window and shot through the opening.

Hanlon's slug caught Dan in the left side, tearing through the flesh and cracking a rib. It was like a jab of a red-hot branding iron. Dan staggered, felt himself begin to fall. His vision blurred; everything was fogged for him by a red-black mist that existed nowhere but in his reeling brain.

He heard Laurie cry, Dan!"

And the Kid yell, "You got him, Jake! You got him!"

Laurie dropped to her knees beside him, but he said thickly, "The door. Get it closed!" He held onto consciousness, but needed time to steady himself. He dragged himself out of the way. Laurie closed the door, slammed it, and there was a bolt to secure it.

She said, frightened but not panicky, "They're coming, Dan!"

He got up, gritting his teeth against the knife-sharp pain in his side, lurched to the window. A lower pane was broken out. He crouched, shoved the barrel of the gun through the opening. They were in the middle of the empty street, all three of them, halted in indecision.

Charlie had the gun the Kid had taken from Dan. His swarthy face, badly battered, was ugly with rage. Dan was trembling. He couldn't hold his gun steady. They were easy targets, but he knew that his aim was going to be off.

He said, "Laurie, there must be a back way out of here. I'll hold them off. Keep going through the hills."

"No," said Laurie. "No, Dan."

"You've got to."

"No. We've been separated for three years, and I won't be apart from you again." She came and sank down beside him, to one side. "Without you, Dan, I—"

There was a crash of shots. Slugs splintered the door, others shattered glass in the window. The three outlaws moved forward as they fired. Dan tried to steady his hand. He fired, and knew that he'd missed.

His shot halted them, and Hanlon yelled, "The window!" Then he cried out as another gun, not Dan's, cracked. A rifle. Hanlon slumped to the ground. The others faced east along the street, began to fire in that direction. Dan fired again, and this time his aim was better. He saw Charlie go down.

The Kid fled in panic, making it to the horses. He never got mounted, however, for the unseen rifle cracked again and the Kid fell.

Laurie gripped Dan's arm. "What's happening?" she asked.

He told her he didn't know.

Then a man leading a horse came into his range of vision. A man carrying a rifle, an ordinary looking man. Dan said, "Blake! It's that detective, Laurie."

DESPITE his appearance, there was nothing ordinary about Samuel P. Blake. He examined Dan's wound as though he knew about such things, and treated and bandaged it with medicine and cloth from a kit he carried.

He dosed Dan with brandy from the same kit, and said, as confidently as any doctor, "You'll be as good as new in a couple weeks."

Then, with Dan lying there somewhat more comfortable, Blake said, "I'd just got here when you and the others topped the ridge. I took to the brush, but kept watching. I learned from a man in Durbin that there'd been a saloon called the Alhambra here in Palisade, so that's why I rode up here."

Dan told him how he and Laurie happened to be there, and added, "But I still don't know if the loot is hidden there."

"I'll have a look," Blake said. "If it's there, I'll find it."

Dan was sure he would. He was convinced that Blake could do anything he set out to do.

It wasn't long before the detective returned to the store building, carrying a pair of dusty saddlebags. He was smiling.

"Lefty was a bartender, remember," he said. "I had a look behind the Alhambra's bar. There was a bin beneath the bar where empty bottles were thrown. The loot was there."

"This clears me," Dan said. "You've got to see that my name is cleared, Blake." He paused, then added bitterly, "But you can't give me back my three years—the three years I rotted in Yuma."

"No, I can't do that," said Blake. "I'm sorry I can't."

"It's all right. You saved my life today. Laurie's too."

Laurie was happy, kneeling there beside Dan. "We'll forget the past, Dan."

They helped Dan get to his feet, outside to the horses and into the saddle. They rode away from the ghost town, holding their horses to a walk because of Dan's condition.

"Lefty must have hoped to hole up here after Hanlon shot him," Blake said. "He hid the loot, then realized his wound was serious. So he headed for the K Bar M, knowing you'd take care of him, Dan."

It was long after dark when they saw the buildings of K Bar M. A horse and buggy stood in the ranch yard. Dan said bitterly, "Merritt and Carmody."

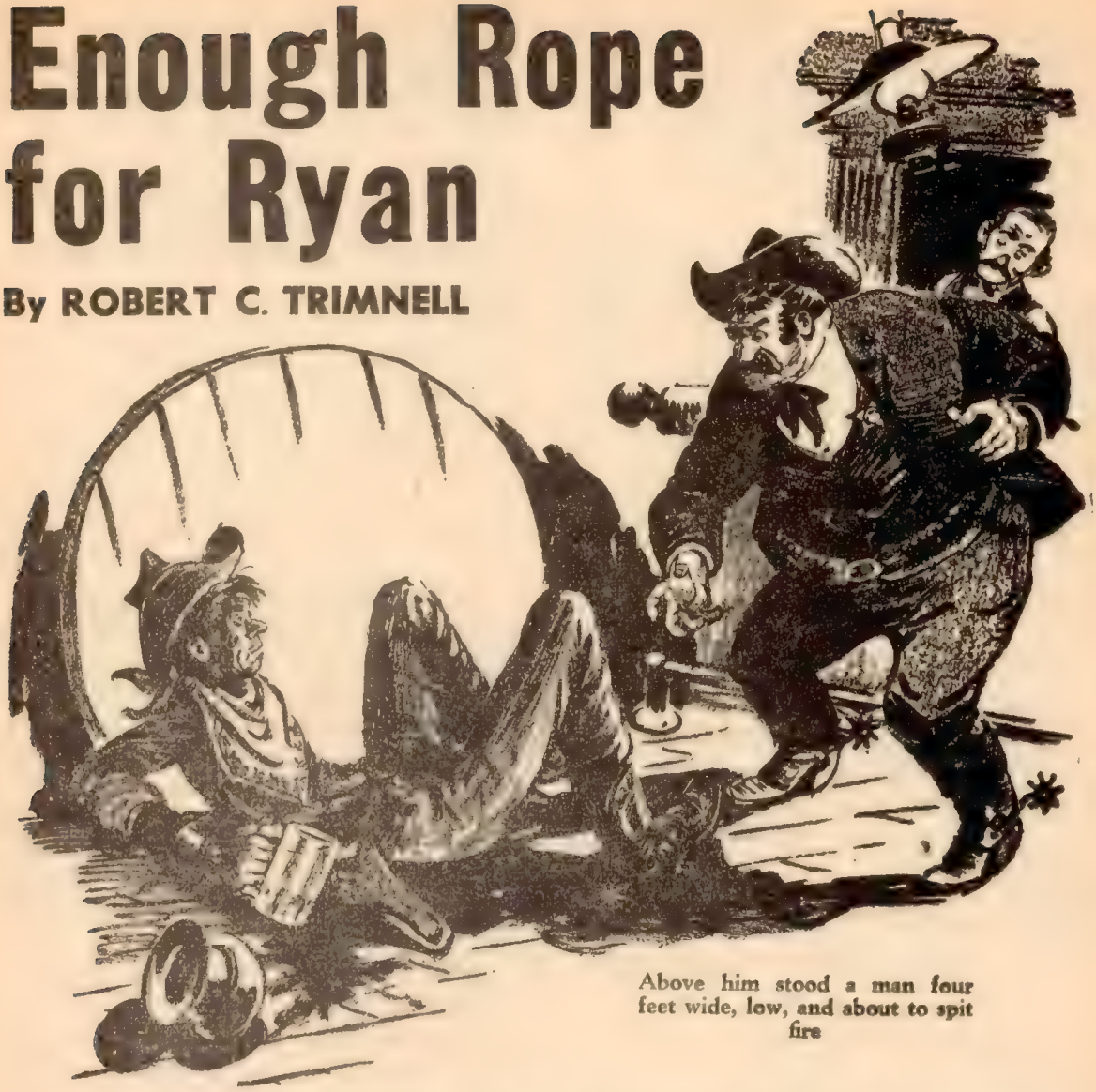
Blake said, low-voiced, "We'll let them play out their hand. You two go in. I'll hang back so they don't see me until they've played their hole card."

He reined in and Dan rode up to the ranch buildings alone. Two men stood in the shadows of the house, their cigars glowing in the darkness. Dan halted in the middle of the yard, Laurie beside him, and forced Lew Merritt and Frank Carmody to come to him.

(Please continue on page 112)

Enough Rope for Ryan

By ROBERT C. TRIMNELL



Above him stood a man four feet wide, low, and about to spit fire

Give a loco, reckless jasper like Ryan rope enough and first thing you know, he'll have one end around his neck, the other end over a tree limb, yelling for some orey-eyed friend to start hauling!

THROUGHOUT the Crowfoot range they said there wasn't a dark or even a dull spot in Billings on Saturday night. The Billings mines were going full blast, and the miners were paid Saturday afternoon. Besides, each hardrock prospector, cowhand, beaver trapper, drummer and outlaw within forty miles made sure he was there to add to the hell and racket.

The town blazed yellow with light, rattled and shook and groaned with all the drinking and roughhousing, the dancing and yowling that went on. Even the canyon walls were lighted up and the town seemed to want to burst out of the narrow, crooked confines it was squeezed into.

But almost immediately on arrival, Lunnisduk Ryan, known as Duke, found the one dark spot in Billings. The city jail.

It was a square little building set off the

street, looking like a block of solid Crowfoot granite reinforced with steel. The Billings city council figured it had to be tight, considering the blizzard-bitten types that ranged the Crowfoot.

And Duke Ryan's impression of Billings' law was that he matched the jail and moved like his tail was afire. Billings' law was built four feet wide and low to the ground, with hairy arms the size of Duke's thighs. One iron hand gripped Duke's shirt collar, the other felt like a bunch of iron bananas clamped on his left leg.

The jail door was open. Duke took a deep breath. He was launched and sailed like a bird until he met the far wall. Fortunately, he met it boots first. But even then it was five minutes before the cell would hold still. The bellowed curses the lawman laid on him were lost in the dizzy lights that whirled around his head.

When he finally saw things clearly, there was a little man dancing a jig in the patch of moonlight that seeped through the steel window grill.

The little man was singing, too.

"Goin' to dance with a dolly with a hole in her stockin'
And her heel keeps a-rockin' "

Duke growled, "That song was a little different when I heard it." He shook his head and eased himself up to a solid oak plank that seemed to be the cell's bed.

The little man paid him no attention. He hummed the song now as his tiny feet wove intricately through a soft-shoe clomp that Duke recognized as *Dance Hall Daisy,* but it was not quite *Dance Hall Daisy;* in the same way that the words to the song weren't the original version.

AT LAST the fellow stopped dancing. Duke sized him up then. For size he was a foot shorter than Duke, say five foot three. Fairly broad at the beam. Little arms and legs. A neat but rather gaudy brown checked suit, with a brown derby hat cocked to one side of his head. About Duke's age, twenty-five, maybe more.

The man surveyed Duke in turn and saw a rangy cowhand with a black eye and a long nose twitching with anger. Suddenly he said, "Well partner, let's split the swag."

"Swag?"

"Oh. You ain't either, hey?"

"I ain't either what?"

"Either what! Fine way—well, anyhow, I'm knowed as Check Morris." He pointed to the checks in his suit, as though they explained his name. "What're you knowed as?"

Duke scratched his head. "In Billings seems like I'm knowed as Kansas Bill, which is why I'm in jail. Truth is, my name's Duke Ryan—Lunnisduk, my folks call me. I never heard of Kansas Bill, I never been in Kansas, and after this I hope Kansas fries in Hell!"

"Oh, Kansas is all right," Check Morris said. He searched in his vest pocket for a moment and came up with a long cigar. "Half a cigar?"

"Half a cigar? You mean *have* a cigar?"

"No, half a cigar."

Duke groaned. He was going to say Check wasn't quite right, somehow. Who else would offer "half a cigar?" But Duke was the kind that petted stray dogs and pail-fed calves who'd lost their mas. So he figured Check might be sensitive about being eight or so degrees off from other folks. "Fine, half a cigar, Check," he said, controlling the exasperation in his voice.

Check sat down beside him and cut the cigar in half with his penknife. They lit up their halves and were quiet for a moment, while Duke tried to straighten out the nutty town of Billings so it made sense.

Now, in the first place, he'd come in quietly, on his horse—well, it was his horse now. Old Dad Jannis had said that no cowpuncher would marry *his* daughter, and had fired Duke without paying the last

month's wages. That's why Duke took the horse.

He hated to leave Susie. They'd talked of eloping, but where could he elope to on one dollar? Anyway, he figured Susie could get herself another man. She'd had plenty of practice at courting tricks while she chased Duke.

He decided to look into the Billings mines, where people said they paid a hundred a month. On that, he figured, he might be able to marry Susie after all.

But just as he entered Billings and slid off his horse in front of a place called the Hokay Saloon, a tall, bony man had come sidling up to him.

"Been lookin' for a cowboy," the man said. "Reckon you'll do."

"Reckon," Duke said, not knowing what else to say.

The man whipped a big, bright yellow bandanna out of his pocket. "That's for you," he said.

Duke took it, baffled. "Why?" he said.

"I'm sellin' a new line of bandannas. Givin' some away free to folks around town. As I see it, they'll become so popular I'll sell a case of 'em. Now you'll wear it around town tonight, won't you? Then it's yours to keep."

"Why, fine," Duke said, thinking Billings was sizing up pretty well as a town. Free stuff while you got off your horse. A fine town.

So he slung it around his neck and knotted it. He eased his lank form up the stairs to the Hokay Saloon.

He crowded into the bar of the place. Strangely, people gave him room. They were looking at him kind of funny, like. "Beer!" he yowled at the bartender.

The bartender looked at him and his eyes bugged. There was a beer mug in his hand at the moment. He set it down on the bar, spilling a little. It kind of dropped from fingers that seemed without strength. But Duke didn't worry much about it. He was too thirsty. Eight hours in the saddle, and the Crowfoot range was barren and dry as a buzzard-picked carcass.

He got his big mouth wrapped around the mug, ducked his long nose into it, and began to swallow. The next thing he knew he was skidding backwards across the floor, splinters ripping his shirt and beer shooting up under his hat. He sat up and foam dribbled down over one eye. He blinked it away.

ABOVE him stood a man four feet wide, low, and about to spit fire. The four-foot width was all muscle. But that didn't bother Duke, because the Ryans were born to fight. He rose off the floor like a sprung trap. The beer mug was in his hand. He didn't hesitate to use it as a weapon after seeing the man's bullet head and iron forearms. He broke it on the bullet head, just as he got a look at the man's chest; a silver star adorned it. CITY MARSHAL.

The beer mug broke and cut Duke's hand but didn't seem to bother the marshal. He rammed an arm out and a fist sledged Duke above the heart. When he came to, the marshal was carrying him through the streets by a leg and and neck, and muttering, "We'll be hangin' you tomorrow mornin', Kansas Bill."

Duke told it all to Check Morris. Finally he said, "Who is Kansas Bill?"

Check sucked in on his cigar and murmured, "You, of course. I'm Dangerous Dan, or maybe just Dan. I dunno. We robbed the stage this afternoon up to the pass."

"Oh," Duke said. "Then that's how we got the swag you talked about splittin'?"

Check nodded. "I offered Iron Joe—that's the city marshal—a share in it, but he wasn't interested."

Duke stood up in front of him. "Look, partner. You know I didn't rob no stage today. Fact is, I was thirty mile from the pass. Just come over it an hour ago."

"Can you prove it?"

"No."

"Then you'll hang at sunrise. I can prove where I was. Playin' penny ante poker with three of the girls at the Gold Shovel Dance Hall. So I'm safe." He got up and went dancing over to the barred patch of moonlight on the floor, began dancing *Dance Hall Daisy* again. "See, I'm a drummer in ladies' stockings and undergarments. That's how come I know the Gold Shovel girls so well. Course, I'd likely be there anyway. Mary works there."

Duke thought he could stand no more of Check's nonsense. The man was enough to drive you crazy. He laid a raw-boned hand on the little fellow's shoulder and dragged him back to the bench. He sat him down hard.

Check tried to get up again but Duke stepped on his toes. He stood that way for some minutes, breathing hoarsely and trying to get himself under control. Finally he sat down, calmed. He threw away his cigar and built a cigarette. The old familiar action put him in his usual calm frame of mind. It assured him he wasn't Kansas Bill. That he was really Duke Ryan. That his father had a big ranch in Wyoming. That his father had booted him out at the age of twenty-one, with the harsh words, "You've loafed long enough, Lunnisduk Ryan. Go out and make your own way. When you came back with five thousand dollars, I'll match it and set you up. No spoiled rich man's son is goin' to loaf around here!"

So Lunnisduk Ryan had chopped the foolishness off his first name and gone out to make his fortune. Seven states and seventeen or so jobs left him at the moment with a gun of his own, which Marshal Iron Joe now had, a stolen horse tied in front of the Hokay Saloon, and a dollar. He owed for the beer at the Hokay. Mine towns were expensive, so he probably owed the dollar.

He sighed. "Check," he said, "I think I better depart this town."

Check waved a hand at the grilled window, at the iron-bound oak door. "Not me. I can prove I'm innocent. And my sample case is at the Gold Shovel. The girls are taking care of it. A good lot, the girls there. Especially Mary. But old Dora, she keeps 'em locked in like it's a nunnery. Think you can kiss one of them girls? Not without you marry her, you don't." He let out a long sigh. "Mary is all set to marry me, soon as she saves enough money."

DUKE'S fingers crushed his cigarette. He walked three times the length of the cell to get ahold of himself. Check wasn't nuts. He was just the kind that mounted a horse over the tail. The kind that puts his money on red when he meant black, but red won.

"Check," he said in a strained voice, "I'm goin' to swear that you was my silent partner in the robbery. Maybe you aren't Dangerous Dan, but you were one of the gang. If they hang me, they hang you."

Check's quick little eyes burst wide open and stayed that way. "Can't do that! All they got on me is a yellow bandanna that was sticking out of my pocket! You see, the two men that held up the stage and killed the driver wore yellow bandannas."

"Check—"

He was broken off by the rattle of a key in the cell door. It swung open and hit the wall so hard the oak timbers in it sounded like splitting pine shingles. Iron Joe came pounding in, his eyes glinting out from under heavy black brows.

"You two jaspers," he growled. He stared at them for a moment and gave a very strange, thin-lipped grin. It twisted his bleak face off to one side. The kind of grin that made Duke think not much justice was to be found in Billings. Plenty of heavily enforced law, but not much justice.

"I got confessions for you two to sign. See, the driver o' that stage died after you shot him. I can keep the town from lynch-

in' you, if you sign." He kicked the door closed behind him and came over toward them with steps that pounded the concrete floor like sledge hammers.

"We didn't do it!" Check screamed. "I was playing cards with Mary and two of the other girls at the—"

Duke was way ahead of him. His eyes had narrowed down and studied out Iron Joe as a man with one thing in mind—two ropes that needed stretching. He didn't care who stretched them, just so they got stretched. And that was not Duke's kind of law.

Duke didn't like kicking people. But with hard ones like Iron Joe, you had to pick the weak spots wherever they lay. An inch below the knee cap.

It was a kick that started way back, a kick that had a long way to travel because Duke had almost four feet of leg. A well loaded kick, for his boots were number thirteen. A kick charged with the hate of the unjustly persecuted.

Iron Joe let out a scream that only stone walls could hold in. The leg switched out from under him. He spun on the other foot. Duke kicked that foot out from under. He went down like a great cliff loosed from its moorings. His head cl-lumped!

But Duke wasn't sure. He leaped high, aiming his boots for that vulnerable spot between ribs and stomach. Both heels hit it, and Duke's hundred and seventy pounds drove them in to the hilt. A long groan of pain rattled out through Iron Joe's teeth. After that he was icy cold.

Duke wasted no time. He took Iron Joe's gun and dropped it into his own empty holster. With Iron Joe's gun belt, he tied the man's feet together and to the oak bed. He found a pair of handcuffs in the marshal's pocket and used them. He popped his yellow bandanna into Iron Joe's mouth, tied it there with the one Check had.

"But, Duke, I'm innocent, I don't want to go running off!"

Duke was almost to the door. "Suit yourself," he said. "I'm lockin' this one-man-war in. You want to be here when he wakes up?"

Check skittered out the door after him.

THEY crouched down in the shadows alongside a store and looked out at the blaze of lights in Billings' main street.

"Now we steal a pair of hosses and ride," Duke said.

"No! I left my sample case with Mary. And I can't leave Mary, either!"

"Then I'll steal *one* hoss."

"You can't do that either. They've got both passes out of Billings Valley guarded, trying to keep the stage robbers from leaving. In the daytime you could find a trail out that isn't guarded, but not at night."

Duke wiped sweat from his forehead. "And this valley is bare as a pinto's eye. No place to hide out when daylight comes."

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WATCH FOR THE SEAL—THE HALL MARK OF FICTION QUALITY

"Hide out?" Check said. "I know—" He drummed his fingers on his teeth, smiling. "We'll hide out in Mary's room!"

"Thought you said the Gold Shovel is respectable."

"It is, but Mary would do that for me. Come on."

Check led him down the street, sticking to the shadows. Duke shook his head wearily. Trust Check to think of hiding out in a respectable dance hall. Duke had seen such places. They ended up as marriage bureaus, the women like Dora that ran them having the girls so under control that the customers married them out of pure desperation. And Check's little off-center mind figured it would be a prize spot to hide. Duke didn't relish the thought of inhabiting a closet, but there it was. No alternative. Valley guarded, and both of them escaped jailbirds.

They came up under a side window that blazed light out over their heads. Check told Duke to get down on his knees so he could stand on his shoulders. He did that. Luckily, Check didn't wear high-heeled boots. He jumped off. "Try another window."

So again Duke got down on his hands and knees while Check climbed his back and stood on tiptoes, peering in.

"See her!" he exclaimed. "Around the other side!"

They scurried around the dance hall and again Duke resumed his undignified posture. Check's shoes ground into his neck as he got excited. Luckily for them, the window was open a little.

"Mary, *hsst! Hsst,* Mary!"

After a bit Duke heard a soft whisper above. "Check-ky, darling! What a surprise to see you this way!"

Duke groaned.

Check said, "You're pretty as a brindle cow, Mary."

Duke collapsed. Even if Check did land heavy on his back, he couldn't have taken that mushy kind of talk much longer.

It was a miracle somebody inside the dance hall didn't see them before the business was transacted.

SOME fifteen minutes later, Mary had explained her splitting headache to her boss and knotted together her bedsheets. That left only the problem of climbing up them to Mary's dark, open window in the second floor of the Gold Shovel.

"I don't think I could climb it," Check said.

Duke knew that fear of Iron Joe's kind of justice would make him scale ten bedsheets. "Check, you tie a loop in the bottom and step into it. We'll haul you up." Duke slithered up the bedsheets like a monkey, and Mary helped him through the window.

Mary was small and blonde, but she ate very regularly and Duke considered himself warned that she might pop the seams of her pink evening gown any minute. She and Duke pulled Check up the side of the buildings, hauling him in the window like a fish on a line. He'd tied a slip knot on his foot. It jammed and took a while for them to get it off.

In spite of that, Mary gave the little drummer a resounding kiss. "Nasty old jail!" she cried.

On which point Duke had to agree.

Otherwise, he wasn't much impressed with Mary. She kept chattering and throwing her arms around Check-ky, who apparently wasn't embarrassed by it.

Duke said, "Look, Mary, we're much obliged. But, woman, Iron Joe wants to stretch our necks at dawn! Let's have some quiet!"

So all three sat down on Mary's bed and thought.

"Like I see it," Duke said, "These stage robbers was a tall gent and a short one, like us. They wore yellow bandannas so the people on the stage wouldn't notice anything but yellow bandannas and that one was tall and one was short. Right?"

He didn't give them a chance to answer. "Now why didn't they just haul tail out of the valley, right off? They'd know the place could be blocked too easy. Now why?"

"Because they got to split the money with somebody," Check put in.

Duke looked at him. That was straight talk. Straighter than Check usually gave out. So he suspicioned it. But it made sense.

"Louisa Mae has a tall and short friend, and they aren't nice, either," Mary said.

"Who's Louisa Mae?"

Mary colored somewhat. Check said, "For the Gold Shovel she, well, she fits among the gals like—a goat among sheep. If you get what I mean, Duke."

Duke pictured Louisa Mae in a gown that started and ended before it had properly begun.

There was a crash of fists on the door. A voice rasped, "Mary! You got men in there? I hear men's voices!"

Mary was equal to the occasion. "No, Madam Dora. But won't you come in and nurse my headache? The door isn't locked."

The bed had only two feet clearance between springs and floor. Being a single bed, Duke and Check found it rather cramped when both of them slid underneath it.

Madame Dora apparently didn't trust her girls. She opened the door and looked in. Duke felt Mary's solid weight bending his spine down until it scratched at the floor. Mary rolled a little in simulated headache agony, but the agony was all Duke's.

"A splitting hearache, Madame Dora!"

"Well, here's a little laudanum like I just gave Louisa Mae for her headache." Duke heard her shoes squeak in turning. "I'll be up later on to see if you're sleeping well, Mary. Now, I've got a world of things to take care of!" She slammed the door and tromped off downstairs.

DUKE digested her words. He felt Check leave him, squirming out from under the bed. But Duke lay deep in thought. Mary—headache. Louisa Mae—headache. Mary—two men under the bed. Louisa Mae—

He slid out from under the pink frilly draperies and sat down with them. Check looked at him. He spoke so low it was hardly more than a movement of lips, and it was so dark they could hardly see his mouth move. "Mary—which room is Louisa Mae's?"

Mary thumbed to the left. "Next room."

For long minutes they were so quiet each other's breathing sounded like a gale. In one of the long periods in which all held their breath they heard a gruff male whisper seep through the wall.

"I shouldn't of shot that driver. The town wouldn't be so riled up if it was just robbery."

Duke clamped a hand over Mary's mouth, seeing she was about to scream. Through his fingers she squealed, "Men in Louisa Mae's room!"

Check's teeth were chattering. But in this, Duke saw opportunity. The chance to clear himself. For he wasn't by nature the kind that ran from trouble. Ryans fought like wildcats when they had to. He had to.

He tiptoed over to the door. A flimsy thing. Louisa Mae's would be the same.

Carefully he opened the door. Check and Mary followed him. A squeaking hinge turned his heart over. He slipped out into the inky hall, felt his way along the wall to the next door. Within, he heard faint whispers.

"Iron Joe says he'll call off the guards out at the passes, now them two jaspers is in jail."

"Them two jaspers" sucked in their breath and listened for more.

Another hoarse male whisper said, "Best wait until he hangs 'em. Then we're clear and won't even have to leave town. Damn, I think the reason you want to hurry off

so fast is to cut Iron Joe out of his share!"

"Iron Joe's share!" Check gurgled, and Mary screamed.

Inside the room three people sucked in their breath. Duke groaned. But he knew it was done now and he had to act before the three in the room recovered from their surprise. He backed to the other side of the hall, ran, smashed the door with his shoulder.

It was flimsier than he thought. It buckled, exploded, and he was skidding across the floor on his belly. Over his head a gun exploded, flame lashed down and singed his hair. As he skidded along he hooked his arms out, hoping to bring one of them down.

He did. As soon as he felt legs he clamped his arms in. But in his hands were not a man's trousers, but a pair of slender, silk-clad legs. He toppled the owner. She came down on his head, and a ruffle of flouncy silk petticoats and things showered over his face.

"I got 'em!" she yelled.

She seemed to be sitting on him, and hitting his head with some instrument. Duke grabbed a bed leg for leverage, threw himself out from under with one wild twisting movement, and sprang to his feet. He stumbled over something heavy on the floor and crashed into the wall. He got a look at the dimly moonlit room.

A tall one and a short one, as he had figured. The tall one pounded Check's head with a sixgun. The small one wasn't doing so well. Mary had a shoe in her hand and chopped the spike heel into his forehead. She held the toe in her hand, chopping fast until the smaller man's knees buckled.

Duke let out a yell and dove for the tall man. He spun, leaving Check. He was in the doorway and Duke's drive slammed him out into the hall, against the far wall. Duke got a fair sight at his jaw, swung his right arm. He missed. The man had rolled away from the blow. Duke stopped his fist before it broke itself on the wall, but it hurt all the same. The man hacked at Duke's head with his gun, then turned and fled down the hall.

His head spinning, Duke went after him. A flood of light ahead marked the stairway down to the dance hall. There was no dancing down there. No music. Dead quiet. Then lumbering footsteps began mounting the stairs.

The tall man stopped at the head of the stairway, looking around frantically. Beyond was a dead end to the hall. Duke yelled and galloped down the hall toward him.

The tall man was cornered now, and swung his gun toward Duke. Duke remembered he was carrying Iron Joe's gun. He made his grab just as the tall man's gun exploded into flame. But it was too dark and the shot missed. Duke hacked hammer and triggered. Flame spiked at the tall man. He slid to the right to duck it, lost his footing, and yelled as he fell down the stairs.

Duke was on his heels. The man tumbled down at full speed. At the bottom, tramping up as fast as his powerful legs could go, was Iron Joe.

"Iron Joe!" Duke yelled. So, the marshal was loose! And crazy mad, his bleak face twisted with fury. The falling owlhoot crashed toward him and Iron Joe sidestepped. The man hit his leg and zoomed off through the air to crash on the floor.

Duke fisted his gunbarrel for a mighty swing, and leaped.

As he sailed through the air he smashed the gun at the rocky face and all the wire and whang leather in his body uncoiled with the blow. The gun hit so hard it was torn out of his hand and he couldn't see where it went.

But the loss of the gun didn't matter, for Duke's head hit the Newell post at the bottom of the stairs and the world was a whirling black barrel of tar even before his journey ended.

DUKE went through the next day in a black cloud and with only sparse moments when he could see light through it. He walked and talked fairly well, but only certain things remained in his memory. There was a courtroom, and Iron Joe wearing handcuffs and a fist-sized bump on his forehead. Duke's gun handle had thumped its target hard. Louisa Mae was there, telling the judge everything, squealing to save her own neck. It seemed Iron Joe was the brains behind the stage holdup. The two men who'd been in Louisa Mae's room had done the job. Duke recognized the tall one as the man that had presented him with the yellow bandanna when he'd hit town. The final proof, though, was the finding of the bags of loot in Louisa Mae's room.

Daylight came in a white flash about the middle of the afternoon. He found he was walking along Billings' main street with Check and Mary, and in his fist was a wad of fifty dollar bills.

"What's this?" he demanded.

Check said, "Why, it's your half of the reward money the stage company put up. Twenty-five hundred dollars. But come on, you got to be the best man at the weddin'."

"Weddin'?" Duke said, and guessed Check and Mary were getting married. "Wait a minute." He stopped and sat down on a porch. It happened to be the Hokay Saloon, and he remembered there was a gambling setup in the place. "My old man said not to come back until I got five thousand dollars, to prove I been shrewd and hard-workin'. And then, if I had that much money, Suzy might talk me into marryin' her."

He jumped up on the porch and led them inside to the Hokay's big, green roulette table.

Another wave of blackness came over him as he laid his twenty-five hundred dollars on the red marker. Check said, "I'll cover you, Duke. That way, we can't lose." He put his half of the reward money on black.

The wheel spun. Black won. Check stuffed five thousand dollars in his pockets while Mary squealed with delight. Duke remembered he still had the dollar he arrived in Billings with.

Check said, "Duke, I've been thinking of starting a sheep ranch. How would you like a job as head sheep herder?"

Duke didn't know who it was that screamed as he ran out of the Hokay, but he suspicioned it was himself. The blackness closed in and didn't leave him entirely for a couple of days, when he found himself in a far distant cowtown saloon leaning on the bar.

"Shot of Longhorn Juice is ten cents," the bartender said.

"I'm home again!" Duke cried, and threw his silver dollar down on the bar with a bang.

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To Hell With Neighbors!

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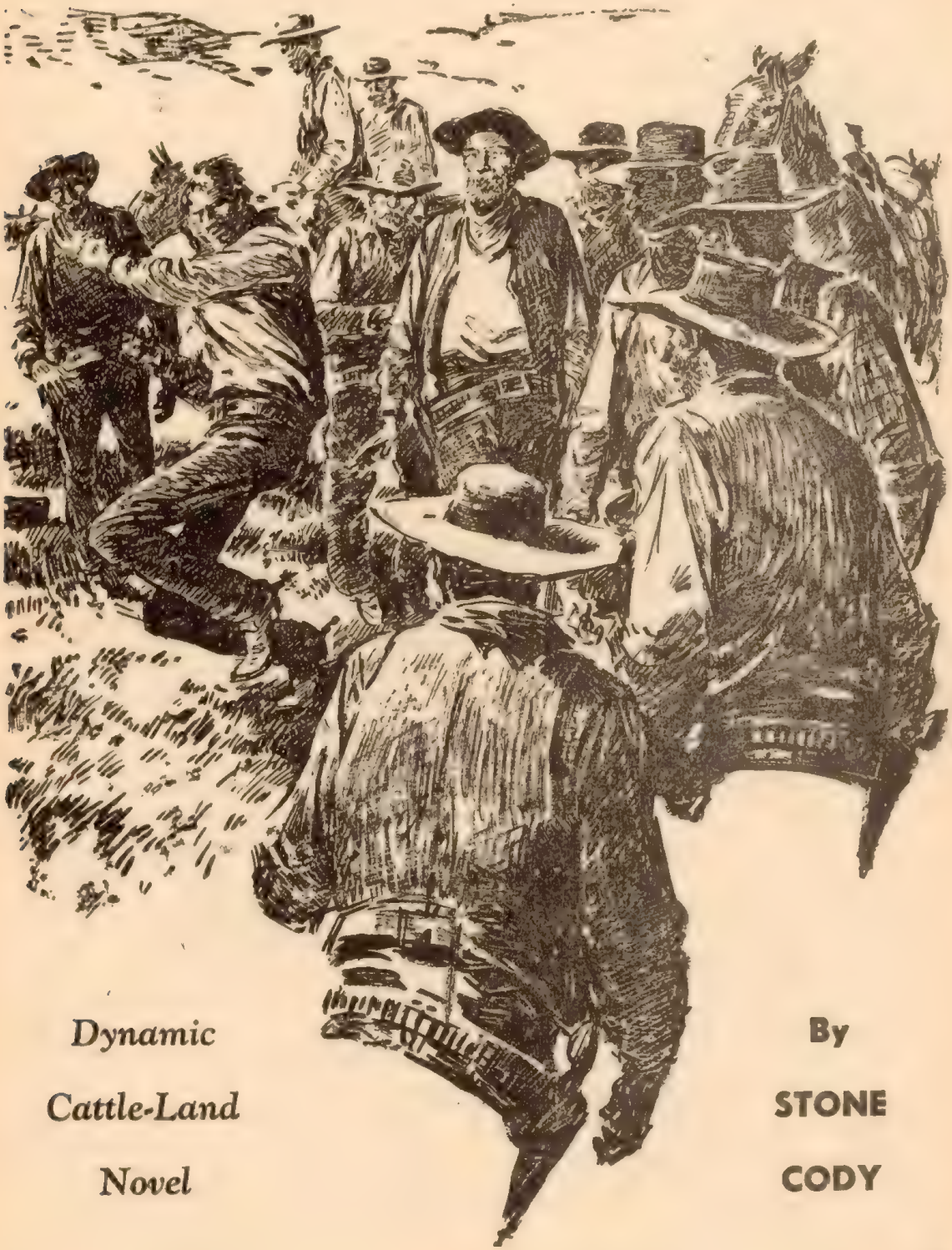
Quarg gave way and suddenly Neb Lee was all over him

Chapter I

BLIZZARD COWMAN

THERE was still snow on the ground that blustering March day when Neb Lee first hit the town of Clamarcan. A sharp wind from the Madras whipped down across the basin and whined gustily about the weathered false fronts which lined the main drag. The group of cattlemen exchanging range gossip on the Buckhorn House porch shivered a little and had begun to think of the pot-bellied stove and warm-

"An eye for an eye" was the motto of Neb Lee, the most hated man in the Clamarcan country, who'd rather see his own range rot than give a hatful of water to a neighbor's last, drouth-stricken steer.



Dynamic Cattle-Land Novel

By STONE CODY

ing liquor in Sam's Silver Dollar across the way.

At that moment a procession of gaunted, harried-looking longhorns appeared in the street, heading for the cattle corrals behind Terhune's Grain, Feed and Drygoods Store. Driving them was one man—a scarecrow figure on a crowbait nag. He hunched against the wind, protected only by a short, brushpopper's jacket, which was torn and had been crudely mended in a dozen places. His jeans were faded and paper-thin from long washing. The relic of a nondescript Stetson was jammed low on his head, forcing tufts of sandy hair out through rents in the crown. Cheap, scuffed boots, badly run down at the heels, completed his rig.

Veedon Quarg, who owned the Moon Seven iron, stared, his pale, slightly bulging eyes wide in simulated astonishment. "Hell's dee-light!" he exclaimed. "Look what the wind blowed in!"

"Gentlemen, hush!" Matt Matthews of the Circle X enthused gravely, "if a man lives long enough he'll shore see some startlin' sights."

The stranger, apparently unaware of the staring group, choused his cattle into the corral and came back to the store. Out of the saddle, he was a lath-lean individual, with a bony, hollow-cheeked face and solemn gray eyes. He was rubbing together his big hands, blue with cold, to restore circulation, as he walked into Terhune's.

Matthews' wide, humorous mouth twitched. "Curiosity ain't one of my vices," he observed, "but I'm obliged to learn more of this."

His squat, square-built figure bow-legged across the street and disappeared into the store. A few minutes later he emerged, red-faced, his eyes suffused with suppressed laughter. The laughter exploded when he reached the Buckhorn porch. He stood shaking, wiping the tears from his eyes.

"Lemme guess," Mike Shane grinned. "He aims to start him a cattle spread with them bone yard critters."

Matthews nodded weakly. "He aims to settle here," he said, obviously mimicking a slow, Southern drawl. "But that ain't the best of it," he added. "What you reckon he calls hisself? Nebuchadnezzar Lee!"

"Wha-at?"

"Hang me for a hoss-thief if I ain't tellin' you gospel! Nebuchadnezzar! He bought some grub from Terhune an' paid for it. Then he pulls out ten dollars an' says, "Ah aim to settle here an' Ah'll be needin' stuff likely. I'd take it kindly if you'd keep this ten dollars on account, so I can buy against it. Mah name's Nebuchadnezzar Lee."

Matthews leaned weakly against a wooden awning. "I wish you could have seen Tate Terhune's face," he went on, "standin' there with that ten dollars in his hand. 'Nebuchadnezzar?' he asks, not believin' it, 'you ain't, I mean—er—that is. . . ."

"The stranger don't bat an eye. 'That's what my folks named me,' he says, kind of mild. 'An' I ain't ashamed of it.' "

Mike Shane, whose Rolling S spread was the biggest in the basin, grinned, "Sounds like we had a plumb addition to the community. Calls for a drink, I reckon."

AS THE group crossed toward Sam's the stranger emerged from the store and started down the street. Veedon Quarg pulled up and eyed him insolently.

"Them skeletons of your'n got the Texas fever, hombre?" he jibed.

Nebuchadnezzar Lee came to a halt, his solemn gray eyes taking in the questioner.

So confronted, the two men made a queer picture. Quarg was big, with heavy shoulders and a narrow waist. His broad-cheeked, handsome face had an arrogant violence of vitality about it, and the same thrusting violence was in his walk, in his posture, even when standing still.

His clothes were the finest money could

buy: soft, bench-made boots, gaudily-spurred; silk shirt, expensive gray Stetson, hand-tooled leather trappings. He made a striking and prosperous-looking figure. Beside him, Nebuchadnezzar Lee looked more like a range bum than ever.

"We been two months on the trail, an' they been inspected for fever," Lee answered finally in his slow drawl. "I'll be glad to show the papers to anybody that's got the right to look at 'em."

Quarg looked at the others and winked. "I'll take your word for it," he said. "I just wanted to be sure that the local buzzards wouldn't get sick. We need 'em around to keep the range clean," he guffawed.

"Why, yes," Lee told him soberly, "I can understand that now."

Some of the amusement went out of Quarg's face. His gaze sharpened as though he wondered whether what the stranger said had a double meaning. It's possible that scrutiny showed him an unsuspected hardness in the newcomer's gray eyes. The single-action .45 which hung in a worn holster at the stranger's gun belt had an air of nestling familiarly against his thigh. In any case when Quarg turned away, his color was higher and he didn't look pleased.

Neb Lee stood looking after the group as they crowded into the saloon, laughing at some hoorawing of Matt Matthews. Lee's bony face looked momentarily bleaker and older than his twenty-five years as he turned and went down the street.

The story of his arrival and intentions went the rounds of the town, but the laughter turned sour a few days later when it was learned that he had had the nerve—or the ignorance—to homestead Fountain Spring, and all the short length of creek which ran from it.

Fountain Spring was some of the best water on the range. For a long time it had been shared amicably enough between Quarg and Mike Shane, coming as it did, about on the borderline between their ranges. Shane was irritated about it, and Quarg's talk was ugly. But the Clamarcan country was on the whole pretty law-abiding and there wasn't anything legal to be done about it. Like the rest of the ranchers in the basin, both men were using free range, open to homesteading. In the end, they took no action to settle their dispute—one good reason being that the country was rich in water. Their cattle would have to drift a little farther to another hole, but that was all.

LEE himself appeared to pay no attention to the unfavorable comment about his homestead choice. He busied himself building a house. He brought the logs down from the hills himself, using his crow-bait horse to drag them; and he hewed them by hand, asking and getting no help. The man's capacity for work seemed endless. He was up before dawn, and worked on by lantern light. In surprisingly short time the house was done.

Immediately then, he appeared at the Rolling S and offered himself as a bronc-peeler. Mike Shane's mouth opened.

"Damn' me, feller," he marveled, "but you've got a gall! You settle on my best water an' then come aroun' expectin' me to give you a job."

"I heard you had got a lot of green broncs in," Lee said patiently, "an' that your buster had left you. I'm a pretty good hand with horses. If you want to use me, you can pay me ten dollars a head, an' pay it only if you're satisfied."

Shane's face had gotten red and his eyes had begun to throw sparks. "Ten dollars a head!" he exploded. "Who the hell do you think you are, nester?"

But Neb Lee was no longer paying attention. His gaze had fallen on Sally Shane, who'd come up behind her father, and his face had taken on a queer, dazed expression.

"You hear me?" Shane was yelling.

"The best thing you can do is get back on that two-bit spread of your'n an' starve to death as quick as possible." He was breathing heavily through his nostrils. "Ten dollars a head!" he snorted. "Fer a nester, there ain't nothing the matter with your nerve!"

Neb Lee looked at him, then his gaze cleared. "It ain't a bad deal for you," he said quietly. "Breakin' a green one is worth that—an' you don't have to pay unless you're plumb satisfied."

Before Shane could explode again, Sally cut in. "Why not, Dad? No use cutting off your nose to spite your face. We need somebody right bad."

Mike Shane calmed down, as he usually did when Sally spoke to him. "Not that bad," he said quietly. And then to Lee, "I'll pay you eight, an' not a cent more."

Neb Lee looked at him. "Ten's my price," he said.

Shane blew up again, but in the end, somewhat grimly, he agreed to pay. His expression said that it had better be good work, if the nester hoped to be paid.

It turned out to be. Lee knew horses and had a way with them. He never used a quirt or spurs, and his riding, when he let a horse buck at all, was a pretty thing to see.

He left the Rolling S with cash in his pocket, an indelible memory of Sally Shane in his mind and a somehow leaner set to his jaw. In addition to the cash, he led back to his ranch two blind buckers he'd acquired from Shane as a bonus for his work. He spent a few days at the risk of his life, curing the horses of bucking blind.

A blind bucker is a horse that loses his head and, apparently, his eyesight, when he begins to buck. Such a horse will buck headlong into anything, a fence, a tree, even over a cliff. In the natural course of events, if his rider stays with him, he loses his footing and falls. When that happened, Neb tied the horse down so he couldn't move and left him there for a few hours. A couple of punishments like that and the animals decided either not to buck at all or else to buck open-eyed.

With his horses cured of their murderous habits, Neb went into town and got himself a second-hand plow. From Tate Terhune he ordered alfalfa seed and wire fence.

The grizzled storekeeper eyed him uneasily. "Son, you ain't aimin' to fence that water, are you?" he asked.

Neb Lee turned a slow, hard gaze on him. "I'm aimin' to fence my alfalfa," he said. "As to the water, I hadn't thought. It's my water, though."

"I'd go slow on it, was I you," Terhune told him. "The range didn't take it too good when you homesteaded the spring. An' we ain't used to fences around here."

Lee said nothing. The old storekeeper squinted at him. "Reckon you'll think I'm hornin' into somethin' that ain't my business," he said, "but there's somethin' about the cut of your pants that I kind of like. Was I you, I wouldn't do anythin' to rile Veedon Quarg. He's got a big spread, an' he'll make a bad enemy. So far, the general opinion on the range has held him back. But if Mike Shane and Matt Matthews and the rest of them quit standin' in the way, then you'll have Veedon to deal with. Me, I wouldn't want it."

"I'll stay within my rights," Lee said grimly. "Let Quarg stay within his."

Terhune shrugged. "You said somethin' about alfalfy seed," he said. "How much did you want?"

When Neb told him, he stared. "What the hell you aim to do with it—eat it?" he demanded.

"I figgered to plant it," Neb said mildly.

Terhune had the exasperated look of a man who is tired of giving advice only to have it ignored, but who can't resist doing it anyhow. "What's the sense of it?" he demanded. "You can't ship it out of

here, an' you ain't likely to need it for your cows. It's rare when we have a tough enough winter around here to need to hand-feed critters, an' the sign this year points to a mild one. You'll jest find yourself with a whackin' lot of hay an' nothin' to do with it."

Neb Lee looked unimpressed. "I'll take the seed anyway," he drawled. He left behind him a storekeeper mumbling apoplectically to himself.

OUTSIDE, he was in time to see a fight, or rather a beating, with Veedon Quarg on the giving end. The man whom Quarg was hammering was a stranger to Neb.

The nester stood watching the battle, lips tight and eyes narrowed. It wasn't nice to watch. Quarg was savage. There was something maniacal in the glare of his eyes as his fists cut the other man to ribbons. The few people in the street made no move to interfere. Caul Sabine, Quarg's foreman, stood near-by, the heel of his hand resting lightly on the butt of his holstered Colt.

Sabine, a thin, long-nosed man, with a slit of a mouth and a slight cast in one eye, had a queer contemptuous look on his face, and there was a glint of something like triumph in his eyes. But it struck the nester that the look was for Quarg rather than the man he was beating.

Under a final, hammering blow from Quarg's fist, his victim went down, semi-conscious, and Quarg stepped forward and aimed a brutal toe for the man's ribs.

Sabine, grinning contemptuously, made no move to interfere or protest.

Neb Lee's muscles tightened, but at that moment Town Marshal Virge Smalley came up and pulled Quarg's arm. The latter kicked his victim once more and then turned to glare at Smalley.

"What the hell are you hornin' in for?" he snarled.

The marshal looked apologetic. "Now, Veedon," he said placatingly, "you don't want to kill him. You done beat him plenty bad enough as is. Let him alone."

Quarg glowered. "You better keep out of my business!" he snapped, and turned away. He and his foreman swung into the saddle and thundered out of town, leaving the man groaning in the street, and Lee stood staring after them thoughtfully.

Later, he learned the cause of the trouble. Veedon Quarg had come in to borrow money from the bank and had, apparently, been refused. At any rate, he came out of the building in a towering rage, and Sim Henley, a rider for a small spread over near the county line, who was in town and jovially drunk, had attempted to hooraw Quarg about it. The result was what Neb had seen.

When he learned that, his gray eyes were more thoughtful—and flint-like—than ever.

Neb Lee got his plow, hoisted it in a buckboard he'd rented, and rode out of town, to the accompaniment of covert grins, for Tate Terhune had lost no time in spreading the story of the alfalfa. The amusement that caused was probably the reason no one attempted to make trouble for the nester. Obviously, the man was a fool who wouldn't last long. The dry season was on; it was too late to plant anything and even if the alfalfa grew it would be useless. He was wasting time and money in a way that would see him broke by spring.

The old saying that the government bet a man a quarter section of land that he'd starve to death on it in less than five years seemed to apply particularly well in this case. So the general decision was to let nature take its course, thus saving trouble all around.

But none of this had any effect on Neb Lee.

Working early and late, he ploughed

his land in record time, and when that was done, he built a dam up near Fountain Spring. The range laughed again, wonderingly. Clem Vanderveer, who had the C V Connected over beyond Shane's Rolling S, rode over one day out of curiosity and came back slapping his thigh in a kind of half-impressed amazement. That fool nester, it appeared, was digging ditches, and trying to run water from the dam to irrigate his alfalfa. What the hell did he think he was up to, anyway?

But the industry of the man, and his initiative, were impressive. He became an object of curiosity, as well as the butt of the countryside's jokes, and more than one rider, with time hanging heavy on his hands during the idle period before fall round-up, rode over to see and report on the work being done by "that fool nester."

NEB LEE became one of the sights of the countryside. Usually he was afoot, a strangely patient, awkward-looking figure, lonely against the wide immensity of the range, endlessly busy.

Only Sally Shane appeared to take him seriously. Enough so that she was angry when he fenced in his big acreage of alfalfa. She met him in town and when Lee came up to speak to her she told him pepperily that she didn't care to be friends with a squatting granger.

Neb Lee went white about the corners of his mouth but his eyes remained steady and patient. "I'm right sorry," he said. "I—there ain't anybody on the range that I'd care about—what they think, I mean —except you."

For a moment Sally looked abashed before his stumbling sincerity. Then she tossed her head. "I thought at least you were a cattleman," she said cuttingly, "not a—a sod-buster."

"You've got me wrong," he told her. "I'm buildin' a cattle spread, an' nothin' else. I'd—"

"It doesn't look like it," she cut him off coldly, and turned away.

"But listen." Neb Lee followed her. "I—"

He broke off because Veedon Quarg had appeared from nowhere and taken Sally's arm possessively. "This rutabaga herder botherin' you, Sally?" he asked, his pale eyes coldly on Neb.

"No," Sally said shortly, "an' I'm sure I wouldn't need your help about it if he was!"

Yet, as they walked off together, Neb Lee saw that her manner toward Quarg had changed and that she was smiling up at him. His hands clenched at his sides and the lean line of his jaw grew more pronounced. He stood so a long moment, motionless, then turned away.

Old Snake-juice Higgs, who swamped for Sam at the Silver Dollar and usually managed to stay at least half drunk, blinked his eyes after the nester. "Whew-w!" he breathed. "Was I Quarg, durn if I wouldn't step easy with thish here Nebuca—Negaba—this-here watchmacallit nestern—durn *me* if I wouldn't!" And he sounded almost sober when he said it.

But nobody paid any attention to Snake-juice Higgs.

Least of all Neb Lee, who rode home with pain in his eyes but no relaxation of the stubbornness of his jaw. Some day he'd prove to Sally Shane. Some day—when it was too late, maybe. It was that thought that put the pain there. Some day, he'd prove to this whole range that thought he was so comic. . . . Not that he gave a damn about what the range thought of him. He didn't need their good opinion. Only, some day they'd wake up and begin laughing on the other side of their mouths. . . .

IT CAME faster than anybody had a right to expect. It was as though the weather gods had thrown in completely with Nebuchadnezzar Lee. The beef

round-up was barely over when the first snow flurry came. And from then on, winter began to settle in with a vengeance. Heavy snows covered the range. A thaw, interrupted quickly by zero weather, coated the top of the snow with a hard glaze of ice, and then a norther whooped down and raged for three days. When it was over the drifts in spots were higher than a mounted man's head and on the flats the snow was belly-deep to a big steer.

Cursing punchers tailed up storm-drifted cattle, fought to get them back to the home range. A lot of the late calf drop and numbers of the older and weaker cattle succumbed to that blizzard—and that was only the beginning of the trouble. For the coating of ice under the snow made it difficult for even strong cows to break through to feed. And the storms did not let up. Day by day, visibly, the cattle got thinner and weaker.

Long before that, long before the first snow, Neb Lee had harvested his big crop of alfalfa, which, under irrigation, had flourished amazingly, and he stored it in the big low shed which he had built—to the amusement of the range. But, as the winter closed down, the range had ceased to laugh at his folly. It had become painfully apparent, in fact, that the nester's folly had really been wisdom.

Mike Shane, too shrewd a cowman to let prejudice injure his spread, gave in and came to him first. And Neb Lee sold him feed—at ten dollars a ton above the market price. Mike cursed and bellowed until he was blue in the face, but in the end he paid. Others followed, wry-mouthed, sour or furious, according to their natures.

The last to give in was Veedon Quarg, but instead of coming personally, he sent his foreman, Carl Sabine. Imperturbable, Neb sold him the last of the feed which he did not need for his own cows, at the same price he had charged the others.

Some of the ranchers had been short of cash, and Neb had taken cattle instead, driving a hard bargain, for with no telling what the rest of the winter would be like, cows on the hoof were a poor risk, in addition to the fact that it would be costly to feed them. He accepted only she-stuff, and when the winter was finally over he had a sizable herd and a more than sizable calf drop.

The range had quit laughing at him, but he hadn't gained in popularity. The fact that his foresight, or his luck—as the men of the basin insisted it was—had done much to help the range through a hard winter did not count against the fact that he had taken advantage of their urgent need.

That resentment still smouldered when the spring calf round-up began. For the sake of economy, the Clamarcan cowmen held their round-ups at the same time, each outfit helping the other. It enabled them to get through with fewer men and only one wagon instead of many. The cost of the round-up was divided among the ranches, according to their size, and most cowmen acted as their own reps, merely because, to old cattlemen, the fun and excitement of round-up was not to be missed.

Despite that fact, the appearance of Neb Lee as his own rep caused a shock. The range was still accustomed to think of the nester as the owner of a scrawny dozen or so cows and had not had time to revise its ideas. But he arrived at dawn on the first morning out, riding his crowbait horse and leading the two he'd gotten from Mike Shane.

THE men, rolling out in response to the cook's "come and get it," stared and rubbed their eyes. Lee nodded curtly, threw his horses into the corral and went quietly to the flap of the chuckwagon, where he collected plate, knife, fork and cup and took his place quietly around the ovens.

The cowboys and ranchers eyed him critically. He was known as a farmer and a shrewd bargainer, and it was remem-

bered that he could peel a bronc, but his status as a cowman was still in doubt. But the awkward-seeming nester's behavior at the range table was beyond criticism. He filled his plate from the ovens without stirring dust, ate quietly and rapidly, without wolfing, in the silence which is customary at the first two meals of the day and sat cross-legged and upright, plate on his knees.

Only once was he caught off-guard. That was when Sally Shane appeared, looking like a half-opened rose and murmuring confused apologies at being late. Lee had gone to get his second cup of coffee. Somebody had yelled "man at the pot," and Neb was in the course of serving when Sally appeared. He poured hot coffee on his hand and dropped the cup. But, as Slats Callahan observed later, "He's got to be excused on the ground not so much of iggerance as right good taste."

When the men went for their horses, Neb Lee was with them and it was apparent that he intended not only to rep but to do his full share of the work. Before the day was over, his riding partner on circle was ready to admit to all and sundry that this Lee was a cowboy.

Before round-up was over the rest of the crew had to come to the same opinion, though with varying degrees of unwillingness. It is possible that on this occasion Neb Lee might have gone far toward making some friends in Clamarcan Basin, but he made no effort. On the contrary, there was an implacable reserve in his manner which discouraged advances from anybody. The cowboys decided that merely being a good hand with cattle was not enough.

Another thing which made it hard for the men to like him was the number of his cattle that turned up, and the percentage of new calves among them. Every time a cow with a vented brand and a fresh T Star on her flank was cut out of the herd, men swore wonderingly and with increasing amazement and irritation

And among those most irritated was Veedon Quarg.

Chapter II

GIRL FOR AN OUTCAST

THE Moon Seven owner had begun by trying to ride Neb Lee the night after his arrival. "Reppin' for some spread?" he'd inquired, and flashed an ill-natured grin around the circle, inviting others to share the joke.

Neb Lee smiled grimly. "Yeah," he drawled, "a new one—the T Star."

The answer got a grin from the men around. It was still a funny idea—that Lee should be calling his homestead a cattle spread.

"What?" Quarg's tone was heavy with sarcasm. "The buzzards ain't got the last of them fever-cows yet?"

"I'd like to set your mind at rest," Neb Lee returned pointedly, "but I'm afraid the buzzards are still hungry."

The laugh that called forth had sent the color into Quarg's face and a sudden glint of hatred into his eyes. And as the round-up went on, his mood didn't improve. His tally showed fewer head than he had expected. Eventually, the conclusion grew in Quarg's mind that something was radically wrong.

His winter losses could not account for the shortage and his temper grew increasingly savage, until not even Sally Shane's presence could hold it altogether in check.

Sally, Neb Lee learned, had been coming on round-up with her dad since she was a gangly kid in pigtails. She could ride and rope, it turned out, like a man. The fact that she and Neb were both busy kept them apart, except for the evenings in camp, and there Veedon Quarg monopolized practically all her time.

Lee made no effort to interfere. He merely sat and watched, his long lips tight

and his face impassive. Only once in a while, it was noticed, his slow gray eyes encountered Sally's, and there was an expression in them which set Quarg to glowering.

It was plain that the big owner of the Moon Seven had developed a special hatred for the nester, but nothing came of it until the last day of round-up. Quarg had begun to get more and more irritated every time a cow with its bawling, spindly calf turned out to belong to Lee. He seemed to take it as a personal affront, and there were moments when he appeared to hold Lee responsible, in some obscure way, for his own losses.

Yet it was Sally who unwittingly set off the trouble.

THAT last morning, after breakfast, she came to Neb Lee, her eyes frank and suddenly warm. "Since you won't come to me, I reckon I'll have to come to you," she said. "I'm sorry about what I said to you. You've sure proved that you're a cattleman, from the word go, and not the sodbuster I was foolish enough to call you."

Neb Lee stood rigid, his eyes unbelieving. Then he drew a long, quivering breath. "I—I take that right kindly of you, ma'am," he stammered.

"And," Sally's soft lips parted in an impish grin. "I'm glad you stuck us for that feed. It served us all right!"

Neb Lee went for his horse with dazed and shining eyes. He didn't notice Veedon Quarg standing near-by, a heavy scowl on his face. If he had, he might have been less surprised when the Moon Seven owner accused him openly that evening of trying to brand a calf that didn't belong to him.

The calf had gotten separated from its mother in the milling herd, but Lee, recognizing it, had singled it out to brand.

"I been waitin' for this," Quarg snarled. "That's a Moon Seven calf. Keep your iron off him."

Neb Lee came to his feet instantly, but his voice was even as he said, "The calf belongs to a brockle-face cow I got from Matthews. I drove the two of 'em in myself this afternoon."

"You're a liar," Quarg told him. "I been watchin' you get away with this long enough, nester. You've tried to put your iron on somethin' that don't belong to you once too often." There was a curious emphasis on the last sentence which caught Neb's ear. Suddenly, the memory came to him of Quarg standing near-by when he left Sally that morning, and the after-image on the man's face. All at once, he understood.

"You've been askin' for this for a long time, Quarg," Lee said quietly. "You may as well have it now."

He shucked his gun belt, letting his Colt fall to the ground. "I'm ready when you are," he said.

Quarg stared at him a moment, his pale eyes at once avid and unbelieving. Then he laughed, his mouth savage and cruel.

It was plain he hadn't expected to get his fight so easily, and that he had half expected gun-play. This nester was an inch shorter than he and at least forty pounds lighter. It was going to be slaughter and the nester had run his head right into it.

Quarg let his gun fall to the ground and stepped forward. "When I get through with you, you thievin' sodbuster," he snapped, "you'll wish you'd picked a softer spot to settle in."

The work of branding had stopped. The cowboys, sensing trouble, had gathered in a circle about the pair, their cheeks dark with interest. Many of them had heard Quarg's charge. For the others, it was enough that a fight was on the cards.

SUDDENLY Neb Lee's left fist licked out, like a lizard's tongue striking. The blow looked easy, but it landed under Quarg's cheekbone with a whiplash smack, and the big rancher's head snapped back.

Instantly, Lee was in on him, his fists drumming a swift, punishing tattoo on Quarg's ribs. The Moon Seven man lashed out furiously, but the nester was no longer there.

Quarg, his eyes insane, his cheek bleeding, rushed in, cursing. Lee met him with a straight left, swung a jarring right to the jaw. The blows straightened out Quarg and shook him, but sheer fury carried him on, and his big right fist connected with Lee's face, knocking the nester back.

From then on it was a matched and savage bout, with Lee's speed and accuracy standing him in good stead against the other man's smashing power. To the onlookers the result looked inevitable. The nester might be a swift and punishing fighter, but he wouldn't be able to stand long against Quarg's unleashed strength. No man of his size could withstand the crushing force of the blows that occasionally found him. Yet in the nester's lath-lean, whipcord body was a power of resistance which had their mouths open in amazement.

Quarg's sledge-hammer fists seemed to be smashing against whalebone which sprang back instantly after every blow—in the form of hard-knuckled fists cracking on the big man's flesh with the sound of a meat-cleaver hacking through to bone.

Yet Lee was hurt. He was fighting, by this time, with a red haze before his eyes and raw pain raging through him. He had never been up against a man who could hit as hard as Veedon Quarg, or one who could take as much punishment. His arms felt heavy, his legs began to lose their pantherish speed. Suddenly Quarg was in on him, his right fist cocked. Neb tried to roll with the punch, but it landed with an impact which set off an explosion in his brain. He felt himself hurtling through the air, then the ground hit him heavily between the shoulders.

The breath was driven out of him, yet he bounced to his feet, closed blindly with the Moon Seven man. Through the whirling chaos which enveloped him, the realization came that he had made a mistake. Quarg's powerful arms reached around him, crushing him. He gathered all his power in a sudden thrust, jerked free enough to slam his fist into the big man's ribs.

Quarg's grip loosened and Neb fought free. He backed off, shaking his head. Then, as his vision cleared, the looming image of Quarg appeared, charging, bellowing. Lee's left fist shot out. The good jarring shock of a blow that had come fully home flashed down his arm to his shoulder. His right swung over, connecting with the deep smack of bone on flesh and bone.

Quarg gave way, and suddenly Neb Lee was all over him. Savage exultation filled him, the pure lust of battle surging through him, clearing his veins of fatigue. His fists drove like triphammers, beating a brutal, ripping tattoo against Quarg's face, cutting it to bloody ribbons. Like an unleashed whirlwind, he drove the big man backwards, now smashing vicious blows to his middle, now hammering savagely at the red blob of his face.

Quarg staggered, reeled, his hands dropping a little. Jaw set, Neb measured him, swung a right with all the lithe power of his body behind it. The blow exploded against the point of Quarg's jaw. The big man's knees buckled, he fell forward on his face and lay still.

What happened after that was a little vague to Neb Lee. The strength had somehow gone out of him and instantly the pain began. He was aware of a silence broken only by Sally Shane's sobbing. Even beyond the pain and exhaustion which filled him the significance of that got through to beat him into a black pit of despair. Sally was crying because he had beaten up Veedon Quarg!

He shook his head, and somehow managed to stay on his feet the rest of the day.

He even took his place at supper and went through the pretense of eating, because the pride in him drove him to try to hide his desperate hurt.

The next morning, he rolled out, with every cell in him crying in agony as he saddled and started out, driving his herd toward his own range.

IT WAS late afternoon when he got there. He forced himself to cook some food and make coffee, and was about to throw himself on his bunk when he saw a rider top the ridge. Sally Shane. He stood rooted in his tracks while she rode up and swung out of the saddle.

"I couldn't let you go off here by yourself," she said, "alone and—" She broke off and an expression of pain came into her eyes. "Oh, your poor face!" she cried. "Does it hurt terribly, Neb?"

Lee looked at her. "No," he said, through cut and swollen lips. "No, it doesn't hurt. It—it feels swell!"

It might have sounded like sarcasm to anybody else, but Sally Shane knew it for what it was. A radiance came up into her eyes. For a long moment they looked at each other, wordless, without any need for talk. Then Sally sighed. "It's been so terribly long, hasn't it?" she murmured.

"I figured it never would change," Lee told her.

"And I've been such a fool," Sally said. "Oh, darling, will I always be a fool?"

"Hush," Neb admonished, catching her to him.

She fought back feebly. "Not now," she breathed. "You—you'll hurt yourself, Neb."

He laughed exultantly and crushed her to him. "I can't kiss you," he said, "Not because it would hurt me, but because my mouth isn't fit for it now, but . . ."

She looked up at him fiercely. Her lips lifted, pressed against the swollen bruise which was his mouth. It was a swift, savage movement, yet somehow there was nothing savage about the kiss. Her lips fluttered against his as lightly as butterfly wings. Only, back of that light pressure was, somehow, primitive tenderness that took Lee's breath away.

"Sally," he breathed. "Sally—" Then the sound of pounding hoofs cut him off.

A group of riders had swung around the cottonwoods that bordered the creek. Neb Lee gave them one narrowed look and swung Sally through the door of the cabin. He himself waited outside.

There were six of them, limned against the faint glow in the western sky, and there was something queer about their appearance. Neb's slitted gaze strained to make out what it was that . . . Then he had it. They were masked! His hand flicked to the butt of his sixgun and he started to move toward the shelter of the doorway.

A Colt laid its flat, shattering bellow across the dusk. Neb saw the tongue of orange flame at the same instant that lead snarled past his ear.

His sixgun came free, added its crashing detonation to the echo of the first shot. He saw a creased mustang rear and stampede, bucking, and he ducked inside as the other guns cut loose. A storm of lead howled through the space he had just occupied. The door slammed behind him.

Sally Shane had found the Winchester which rested on pegs over the doorway. Her face bloodless, but with lips firm, she was already reaching for it.

Neb knocked her clear of the doorway just as the thundering hoofs surged by and a hail of bullets slogged into the wood of the door. But those hand-hewn planks were thick. A hard-driven slug splintered the inner surface but failed to come through.

The riders raced by, whirled and came back, throwing lead at the window. Crouched at one corner, Neb thumbed his sixgun in reply, and cursed as he saw Sally, blazing-eyed, levering the Winchester at the other side of the window.

Chapter III

A GUN TRAP IS SET

OUT THERE, a man swayed in the saddle, clutching his side; then the charge was out of sight again. Neb jumped to the door and opened it, but the riders were gathered a hundred yards away in the shadow of the cottonwoods, apparently in conference. Grim-lipped, Neb turned back and took the Winchester from Sally's hand.

A voice, obviously disguised, shouted from the shadows. "This is warnin', nester. Git off this range."

For answer, Neb drove a Winchester slug at the sound. There was a sudden flurry under the trees, then the noise of horses' hoofs splashing through the creek.

Sally's voice at his elbow sounded shaky. "Did—did you hit anybody?"

"I dunno." Neb's voice was curt. "I tried hard enough."

The girl caught her breath a little in the darkness. "But they—they weren't shooting, then," she said.

The implied reproach rasped Lee's nerves. "Listen, lady," he said, tight-lipped. "This ain't a game of marbles. That crowd was out to kill me. When that happens I try to call my shots."

Sally was silent a moment. Then she said, in a subdued tone, "Who do you think it was, Neb?"

"Quarg," Neb clipped grimly.

"No! Oh, no, Neb!" the girl cried. "Veedon wouldn't—he wouldn't do anything like this."

Neb's voice was stiff. "Didn't it sound to you like Sabine's voice?" he demanded. "An' that ain't all. I recognized that bay Quarg rides sometimes."

"I can't believe it," Sally protested. "He might be sore, yes. But *this*—Veedon wouldn't do a thing like this. It—it's crazy."

"My guess is he is crazy," Neb told her. "I've been thinking that for some time. He's one of the hombres that can't stand losin'. Hell, he can't even stand hoorawin'. I saw that once in town." He broke off, struck by a thought. "What do you know about Caul Sabine?" he asked.

"Why, nothing—except that he works for Veedon, and that I don't like him. Why?"

"I've got a notion he's ridin' Quarg someway. Quarg don't need much encouragement to be a damn fool, but I'm guessin' that what encouragement he needs he's gettin' from Sabine." In the darkness, his voice hummed suddenly. "Sabine's playin' some kind of game of his own. Quarg's missin' cattle, but nobody else is. An' I've seen Sabine look at him. . . ."

Sally's silence somehow showed her doubt, and Neb Lee dropped the subject. Later, he rode home with Sally, neither wishing to acknowledge the constraint between them. But at the last, Sally did acknowledge it.

She came suddenly into Neb's arms. "It's got nothing to do with us, Neb," she murmured.

And Neb Lee rode home feeling as though his body had been through a stone crusher, but not caring.

He half expected to find his place burned, but nothing had happened, and, in the days that followed, he was left in peace. His conviction that Quarg was behind the attempted dry-gulching deepened. The violent, murderous impulse and the lack of follow-through was characteristic of the man. Neb guessed, too, that Quarg had been disconcerted to find two people in the shack, for it must have been obvious that one man would be unable to operate a Colt and a Winchester at the same moment. Failing of his purpose, he must have wanted to avoid suspicion of himself by lying low.

Neb learned that one of Quarg's riders was missing, supposed to have ridden

south on business of his own, and guessed that this was the man he had seen sway in the saddle. He must have been badly hit. But Neb, hard-faced, went about his business, knowing that in the end it was bound to come to a showdown between him and Veedon Quarg. And by Quarg's side, backing him, would be Caul Sabine.

THE first showdown, however, came with Mike Shane, when he heard about Neb and Sally. Neb went to see him, and came out of the Rolling S office with his face wooden but his eyes blazing pits of anger.

"To hell with you an' your permission!" he flung back over his shoulder as he left the room. "I'll have you crawlin' to me with your tail between your legs!"

"Get off this spread an' stay off it, you damn squirt," Mike's bellow followed him. "Keep a'walkin' before I hoss-whip you into the saddle."

Sally, who had been waiting outside the door, caught her breath. Her face had gone dead-white. Neb Lee scarcely looked at her. He swung back toward Mike Shane.

"You've already lived ten minutes longer than any other man would have," he lashed out. "Now keep your damn mouth shut before I shut it for you with lead."

Sally, seeing the blazing deadliness in his eyes, cried out and caught his arm. "Neb, stop!" she cried. "Come away, do you hear? Come away!"

She led him off to his horse, disregarding her father's command to come back into the house.

"You—you shouldn't have talked to him like that," she said to Neb. "He's my father."

Neb's mouth was white. "I don't care who he is!" he clipped.

Something like a groan burst from Sally. "Mike doesn't mean all he says, Neb. You—shouldn't have lost your temper. You should have let me handle him. Now, it's going to be so difficult for us."

Neb's eyes were unrelenting. "It's go-in' to be impossible," he said, "unless you come to me."

"I'll come to you," Sally said swiftly. "I'll marry you today!"

Some of the hardness went out of Neb's eyes. "We can't do that yet," he told her. "I haven't got the money to marry a girl like you. I haven't got the money to marry anybody. But I'll get it—don't worry about that!"

He caught Sally by the arms and looked deep into her eyes. "Will you wait, honey?" he asked.

"I'll wait, Neb, no matter how long it is. . . ."

THE months drifted by. Neb Lee hired a hand—a broken-down old cowboy named Hutch McCune, who could barely sit a saddle. He had been riding chuck-line and was about as miserable looking a figure as Neb had been when he first arrived.

The range snorted when it heard the news, but the snort took on an overtone of exasperated disgust when the fact leaked out that Neb was paying his hand only ten a month and had himself taken a job with a new outfit on the range for thirty and found. On his days off, Neb rode forty miles to help Hutch work the spread.

That fall, beef prices were low and Neb Lee bought in some cattle for cash. By the following spring, prices had plummeted and harried ranches were wondering whether it was going to be worth while to round stuff up for shipment. Neb Lee went to the bank and borrowed money against the purchase of additional cattle. He got it, and did some buying from his neighbors at rock-bottom prices.

Veedon Quarg was wild-eyed. He had tried to borrow money and had been refused. "Yet you'll lend to that damn tramp sodbuster," he raged.

The banker shrugged. "He ain't got a mortgage on a thing he owns," he pointed out, "an' no debts. He's already got enough cattle to cover my loan, and with the stuff he's goin' to buy there won't be better paper on the bank's books!"

That got around, too, and men's mouths hardened. This nester was just a mite two-fisted for anybody's taste. A man who'd take advantage of an old fellow like Hutch McCune, just to profit to the extent of twenty dirty dollars a month. . . .! By God, before anybody knew it, he'd have the whole range eaten up!

The atmosphere of coldness which surrounded Neb Lee when he came into town increased, and so did the hard thrust of Neb Lee's jaw.

Clem Vanderveer, of the C V Connected, openly commiserated with Hutch McCune one day in town. The old puncher rubbed his head reflectively. "It ain't much, fer shore," he acknowledged, looking at Clem out of the corner of a rheumy and sardonic eye. "Only ten dollars more than anybody else on this range was willin' fer to pay me. You might even say that I was the highest paid puncher aroun' here, gittin', like I do, ten simoleons more'n my market price."

Vanderveer flushed because he had been one of those who had told the old puncher that there was no job for him on the CV Connected.

"Yes," Hutch went on, with exaggerated mildness. "It's a kind of a change for me. I git paid, an' I eat."

"Eat!" exploded Tate Terhune, in whose store the conversation took place. "Beans! By God, if you can call that eatin'!"

It was one of Tate's grievances that Neb Lee spent less money on supplies than any man he'd ever known.

Hutch McCune grinned. "We don't waste our dinero," he said. "We got cows to buy."

He swaggered out, leaving a wry-mouthed and silent audience behind him.

SO SUMMER went into winter and winter into spring. It was a year of little snowfall, yet the first spring green found Neb Lee gaunter than ever, fined down, the strain of near-exhaustion around his eyes. For that year, in addition to taking care of a herd which was now too big for two men, he had put the finishing touches on the big new dam at Fountain Spring.

And something of the same strain was on the face of Sally Shane.

Her cheeks were thinner and there were faint smudges under eyes which had somehow forgotten how to dance. It had been two years now since that day when she had promised to wait for Neb Lee. In that time she had seen remarkably little of him, partly because her father had made it difficult, but chiefly because Neb was so endlessly busy.

Once or twice she had told him what the range was saying of him, and his only response had been a tightened mouth and a look of contempt. He seemed to have no realization that it might be difficult for her to share the scorn he felt for the opinion of the range—that these men and women who disliked him were her old friends and neighbors, folk who had grown into the very fibres of her heart.

Nor did he show any realization that the waiting might be hard for her for another reason than her love for him. Folks talked about that, too. For, of course, her engagement to Neb, and Mike Shane's opposition, was known. And Neb Lee was in a position to marry now, if he wanted to. The only reason he could not was that he had not sold a single cow since he had hit the range. He still had his original dozen longhorns, no longer scrawny now but fat and fruitful.

But Sally would have died rather than say anything about this matter.

And then, almost before the Clamarcan men realized that the winter was over, the

drought hit. The ominous dryness of the spring burned into sudden blasting summer. The grass turned yellow before it had gotten its growth. And the water began to go.

It wasn't much at first. The basin was rich in water, so men cursed the hot blue cloudless skies without much real conviction. It was going to be a bad summer; that was all; and damn that endless southwest wind!

THEN the water began to go. First the southern end of the basin, where the Torcido Badlands linked the Point Horn Hills to the Madras. It was as though that bitter, twisted stretch of malpais was spreading like a blight, slowly up the valley. Water hole after water hole shrank, turned into stinking mud, hardened to hoof-beaten clay. And out across the hot stretches of sun-blasted grass sounded the one thing that more than another rips at a cowman's soul—the endless, agonized clamor of cattle bellowing for water.

Even Fountain Spring which never in the history of the range had been known to go dry, slowed to a trickle. But that trickle was enough to maintain the level of the tons of water backed up behind Neb Lee's dam. That level fell only slightly even when Lee released water into his long irrigation ditches and along the bed of creek for his cattle to drink.

It even served for other cattle—at a price! Matt Matthews came to him first, heard the charge per head with bulging eyes. He swore sulphurously for fifteen minutes—and paid.

Because Mike Shane would not come, Sally did so, and paid the same price.

"You—you're unbelievable!" she gasped. "You mean you'll make *us* pay for the water we always had—and at a price like that."

Neb Lee's mouth was hard. "Everythin' I've got will belong to you, Sally," he clipped, "but not your dad. He pays, like the rest of 'em do."

Sally's chin came up and her eyes blazed. "You'll get your money, *Mister* Lee," she said coldly. And she rode away with never a backward glance.

Neb Lee looked after her, his gray eyes full of savage pain, but the line of his jaw still granite hard.

Veedon Quarg came with Caul Sabine and raved. "By God, nester, my cows are goin' to drink my water, or I'll run you off this range," he threatened.

"You better figger on runnin' Uncle Sam off with me then," Neb told him dryly. "And neither of us run easy."

"An, me, I'm too old to run," Hutch McCune put in, "but I ain't too old to shoot."

Veedon Quarg turned away in silence.

The next Saturday, Neb Lee rode into town. He had supplies to buy and some checks to deposit in the bank.

Hutch considered him thoughtfully. "Neb," he said at length, "was I you, I'd git in an' git out fast. I don't like the look of things."

Neb grinned without mirth. "I can take care of myself," he said drily.

It was not until he came out of the bank that he knew he had promised too much. He was just crossing the street, heading diagonally toward Terhune's store, when he saw the gun-trap.

Chapter IV

BULLETS BUY GOOD NEIGHBORS

THE street wasn't very crowded. It was as though the rest of the men in town had sensed trouble and stayed out of the way. Then Neb saw Veedon Quarg in his path, flanked by a man whose presence yelled danger as though a physical voice had shouted the word. He was a white-headed, white-eyebrowed hombre with hot red-brown eyes, and a pair of guns in

greased holsters tied low on his thighs.

Veedon Quarg's jaw was thrust out belligerently, his pale, flickering gaze venomous. Neb's nerves crisped, his gray eyes photographing every detail of the scene. To his right stood Caul Sabine and another Moon Seven man. To the left, down from the porch of the Buckhorn House where hard-eyed Mike Shane waited, three more Moon Seven men stood. One of them, a short, squat man whose unwinking gaze was fixed on Neb, had gunslick written on him as plainly as did the albino killer by Quarg's side.

Down the street, a pudgy stranger, who looked like a whiskey drummer, ducked suddenly into a space between the buildings. At the entrance to Sam's Silver Dollar Saloon, Matt Matthews, with Clem Vanderveer at his side, stopped with his foot on the step and stared. Behind Neb hoofs hammered as somebody rode in at a high lope.

Neb Lee felt the hot thrust of the wind which poured down the street, and changed the angle of his course slightly. Dust lifted from the powdered street, stung at his narrowed eyes.

Veedon Quarg's voice lifted. "Lee! You damned sneakin' cow-thief!" His hand lashed for his gun.

Neb Lee barely looked at him. As his hand raced toward the butt of his .45, his eyes were fixed on the albino gunman, foreseeing the lightning magic of that man's draw. The gunman's Colt flicked up as Neb's sixgun kicked hard in his hand. A slug fanned his cheek and the albino gunman's mouth was dropping open, his tongue suddenly protruding.

All at once the street was a hammering hell of Colt-fire. Neb fanned a shot at Quarg, missed as something smacked him in the ribs and whirled him half off his feet. The albino gunman was off his feet now, sitting in the dust with his hands clutching his stomach.

Neb swung his six-shooter toward the squat gunman at his left, knowing that he had fired the shot which had hit him in the ribs. But the gunman wasn't shooting at Neb any more. His guns were turned on the porch of the Buckhorn House, where Mike Shane crouched with a smoking Colt in his fist.

Neb's slug smashed the point of the gunman's shoulder and the flattened lead drove on to tear the side out of the man's face.

Neb swung about, expecting Caul Sabine's lead in the back, but Sabine wasn't shooting at him either. He was trading lead with Clem Vanderveer and Matt Matthews and a broken-down oldster who stood beside a flank-heaving ex-blind-bucker and thumbed a Frontier Colt with rheumatic fingers. The Moon Seven man beside Sabine was down, and even as Neb turned, Sabine darted into the space between the buildings and ran.

The hell's thunder in that street was suddenly quiet—so quiet that the silence seemed to shout by contrast. Neb Lee felt the cold sweat coming out on his lips and forehead. His head whirled.

He turned toward Hutch McCune, but the oldster was down—down on his face in the dust. Neb cried, "Hutch," hoarsely, and started toward him. Then, surprisingly, the street heaved up to him and slapped him hard. . . .

WHEN he came to he was in a bedroom of the Buckhorn, his head and side bandaged. He had been lucky, he found. Nothing but a scalp-crease, a couple of cracked ribs and a nasty furrow on his side.

Clem Vanderveer and Matt Matthews were in the room with the doctor. Neb looked at them puzzled. "How come you horned in?" he asked with a hint of hardness in his tone. "Don't none of you like me better'n Quarg does."

Both men looked embarrassed. "No," Clem Vanderveer answered slowly. "We ain't been likin' you—likely because you

was gettin' along too well, makin' fools out of us. But, shucks, nobody can really hate a gent fer standin' on his own feet."

There was a silence during which Neb Lee's eyes were suspicious.

"Fer God's sake, hombre," Matt Matthews búrst out, "that there gun-trap wasn't nothin' but murder. We ain't the kind to stand by an' see a neighbor get murdered!"

Neb Lee lay and thought that over awhile. Presently, he said, "I'm obliged," in a stiff tone.

When they had gone, he got up and was starting to dress when the doctor came in. "Man, you're crazy!" he shouted.

Neb Lee looked at him. "Don't try to tell me my business," he said irritably. "Who the hell do you think will take care of my spread?" He had learned that Hutch McCune wasn't dead, but would be laid up for months with a broken thigh.

Later, he was on his way, with his head floating somewhere above him and every jolt of his horse's hoofs sending a stab of agony through his side.

He wondered cynically if the Clamarcan Basin men thought he was going to forget everything and give up his plans because they had helped him in a gun fight.

"Neighbor!" he snorted.

Likely they'd want to have a neighbor's water, too. Well, they could have it—at a price.

By the time he got back to his ranchhouse, the spells of light-headedness were getting more frequent, and longer. He felt weak and sick. He wished Sally were there. Then he remembered that Sally would never be there again. That had been plain enough from her manner.

His teeth clamped until pain lanced through them to join the pain of that thought in his mind.

Neighbor! He laughed aloud at the metallic, burning sky. The word kept digging at him, returning to sting him, like a deer-fly. Neighbor! To hell with it!

He dismounted in front of the log house he had built, meaning to unsaddle when he had had a drink. He cast a habitual, sweeping glance up toward the benchlands of the Madras, where his range and dam lay. Then he remembered that the weather instinct which lay deep within him, like some affinity with the primeval earth and sky, had been whispering to him of a change of wind and he had been puzzling over its possible meaning.

Suddenly he started, tensed. There was smoke up there. Smoke—and flame!

HIS head cleared, as though the wind had swept a dust fog from it. He saw tiny dots of mounted figures racing along behind the fire. They had set it, he understood instantly, and red hell broke loose in his heart. That fire would gut his range, stampede and burn his cattle.

He jumped into the house, came out with his Winchester. There wasn't any doubt in his mind who had done this thing. Veedon Quarg!

Then Neb Lee stopped in his tracks, immobile, every sense keyed high. His head went back and a great, mocking laugh burst from his throat. The wind had shifted! That fire would spread and ruin the rest of the range, leaving it charred and worthless, but it would pass by Neb Lee. It would pass Veedon Quarg by, too! But that didn't matter, for Quarg was busted anyhow. Lee would be king of this range —would own it!

They had laughed at him when he came here four years ago. Now they'd laugh on the other side of their mouths!

There was no way to stop the fire now. One man could do nothing against it, and in minutes it would be across the creek and loose. The others would see it and come to try to check it, but it would be useless then. They'd come riding. . . .

He threw back his head and laughed harshly. "Neighbors!" he shouted. "Come on, neighbors!"

Damn Veedon Quarg, anyway! The man had the heart of a wolverine. That was one thing that would have to be dealt with, anyway—afterwards. Veedon Quarg!

Memory flashed back in Neb Lee to the moment when he had faced those guns, walking to his certain death. The way his throat had gone dry. The sudden sweat on his upper lip and in the palms of his hands, and the shocking, deadly crash of gunfire. Every detail of the fight was etched suddenly on his mind.

Vanderveer and Matthews, indignant anger stamped on their fighting faces, had hammered lead at Sabine and his partner. Yes, they'd been neighbors; their guns had racketed at his side, drawing the death-lead away from him . . .

Neb Lee groaned suddenly. His eye went to a sunken sod shed a hundred yards from the house—flashed to it and then recoiled. No! By God, no!

As though drawn by an irresistible magnet, his suddenly tortured gaze went above to where his dam stood, high and white in the blazing sun. His dam—his pride! There was safety, prosperity, riches, in the proud lift of the strong earthen bank up from the sere ground. Without that dam, without that water, his cattle would die in three days—in five. No! By God, no! Let them take care of themselves. Not his dam. Not his *dam*!

Then out of the red haze before his eyes, Sally Shane's face appeared, wavering, from tenderness to anger, and regarded him with sudden pleading.

BEHIND her, the fire leaped upward, spreading and racing forward toward the dry creek-bed, out of control now. Desperately Neb Lee glanced about him, like a man who seeks help in his agony and does not find it. Then his eyes steadied, the lean line of his jaw tensed.

He disregarded the agony beating and wrenching at his side as he raced toward the sod house, and staggered out with a box on which was marked the word DYNAMITE in big red letters. Working fast, he lashed the box to the back of a spare horse from the corral. If he could get there in time, if he could let those crashing tons of water loose into the old creek bed, the fire would stop there—stop enough so that a man could fight it . . .!

Ten seconds later he was in the saddle, leading the packhorse, hearing the roar of the flames as they gathered force.

Out of a ravine ahead, riders appeared—three of them, spurring toward him. He recognized Veedon Quarg, Caul Sabine and another.

His sixgun jumped into his hand. "Come an' get it, Quarg!" he yelled. "If you miss me try for the dynamite, an' we'll all go to hell together!"

Gun-flaming, lead-rope tugging at his elbow, he jumped his horse into a racing charge. Sixguns blasted the hot day before him, lead snarled about him as his hot gun bucked against his palm.

Veedon Quarg bent over his saddle, coughing, sliding down and plunging earthward. Sabine, his eyes panicky as this racketing death thundered upon him, lost his head and hammered wild lead past his attacker. At the last moment, seeing himself lost, he tried to ride aside, but Neb's bullet slapped into crackling bone and a dark hole appeared in Caul Sabine's temple.

The other Moon Seven man was a desperately racing figure in the distance as Neb rode for the dam.

He got there, his heart hammering, that old red haze before his eyes and the growing roar of the fire in his ears. He set the fuse with hurried, fumbling fingers. He lit it and began his stumbling run for safety. He fell and got up, his head whirling, then fell again. Feebly, he struggled to regain his feet. Somehow, he knew he'd been hit again. There was fresh blood running down his body, the strength was flowing out of him. He fell back to the ground. . . .

Swift, urgent hands were on him, lifting

him. Sally's frantic voice was in his ear. "Neb! Neb darling! Get up!" He tried, but it was her hands that were dragging him, dragging him . . . The world went to pieces in a stunning smash. The sound of a million cannon crushed his ears. A blast slammed him to the ground. And there was only blackness. . . .

Somehow, later a voice said, "If the shock don't kill him, the bullets oughtn't to. He's hit bad, but he's tough."

"Tough! Gentlemen, hush! Think of him fightin' them hellions off while he rode with that durn giant powder, same as sittin' on his shoulder blades!"

"By God, Doc, he's got to live! We owe him plenty. Without his water there wouldn't have been no stoppin' that fire. There wouldn't have been a spread left on the range."

"To hell with that!" Was this Mike Shane's bellow? "You patch him up, Doc, or I'll have your heart. He's got to live, because he's a *man*!"

Feebly, wonderingly, Neb Lee opened his eyes. Sally was kneeling at his side, her eyes praying. Behind her stood the men of Clamarcan Basin—Matt Matthews, Clem Vanderveer, Tate Terhune, Mike Shane and others. His eyes wandered over them, meeting theirs. Then he grinned, feebly.

"Hello, neighbors," said Nebuchadnezzar Lee.

* * *

When the rain roared down from the Madras days later, there were those who said that the dynamite explosion was really responsible for it, and others who argued that the shift in the wind had brought it, but there was more than one who thought as Clem Vanderveer did.

"If we hadn't gotten Neb on our side," Clem asserted, "that durn drought never would have ended. That boy an' weather is one an' the same. When Neb spits, the weather bounces."

Matt Matthews nodded solemnly. "With him an' Sally both in there working for us, I figger this range is sittin' nice—yes, *sir*, sittin'—mighty-nice."

Mike Shane cleared his throat. "A plumb nice addition to the community," he barked. "Calls for a drink, I reckon!"

THE END

Jess Overstreet rode a reckless, Devil-may-care trail, with larceny in his heart and sudden death at his hip, until he came to this town . . . and met this girl . . . and wanted to stay—and knew that he couldn't.

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KING OF

Payuk snarled his challenge at the beautiful black-and-white-striped creature. . . .

THE BITTER ROOTS

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

In that world of fire and smoke and deadly night-prowling creatures, Payuk, orphaned grizzly cub, learned the lesson of the wild: Run today—and live to kill tomorrow!

THE roaring fire that swept through the Desolation Valley, forcing the creatures of the wilderness to flee in panic, made strange bedfellows.

For it was out of this devastating red tide, when timorous creatures at last stirred from their havens of creek, lake and swamp, that young Payuk a silvertip cub, had his meeting with the gangly legged creature that stood before him quivering in every limb.

He was Moosewa, a rangy bull moose calf.

Payuk was born of the predatory kings of the wild craglands and valley. . . . Moosewa was the lone offspring of parents who had been lost with their fellows in the claiming bog of a treacherous sulphur spring into which they had plunged in their panic.

Payuk, the orphaned grizzly, was instinctively belligerent. He half rose and moaned and champed his jaws as his father or mother might have done.

Yet in his youth, he had a fear of this rangy creature.

Now he whimpered, a sound that belied his chunky form. Moosewa bobbed his head as if he had accepted this small sound as a friendly greeting.

His body ceased to quiver. He grunted and minced a pace or two forward.

Little Payuk bared his immature fangs, but offered no other sign of belligerence.

Shortly, both quivering, their noses touched. The bear rocked back. The scent tang was frightening. But shortly he had recovered from his fright. The strange, long-legged creature with the oversized head and ears had commenced to skip and cavort.

The sun broke through the roiling clouds and smoke to warm the valley, now steaming after the heavy rain that had put a stop to the ravaging fire.

Young Payuk rose to his full height, and squealed. The moose calf whirled in his tracks and reared on his hind legs, towering well above the bear. But when he came down, he whirled. His sharp forehoofs thudded into the ground. Again and again he put on his ludicrous show. Then all at once he whirled. His big ears had caught a crackling sound to the rear.

With a sharp little grunt, he lunged toward a fringe of fire-charred alders. Payuk, the cub, scrambled awkwardly along in his wake as a huge creature came stomping toward the swamp, a creature whose voice sounds were menacing, threatening.

He was Tal, the wild stallion, bringing up the few members of his singed, shaggy band who had escaped the sweeping fire.

BLOWING hard, young Moosewa at last spun. He had reached a belt of mixed deciduous and evergreen growth untouched by the fire.

His large eyes were dilated, his nos-

trils flared as he turned, to watch the magnificent stallion stomp on toward the edge of the swamp.

Little Payuk rose to his full height, but his eyes were not as keen as his orphaned companion's. He saw only a blur of movement. There was no opportunity to put his keen sense of smell to use, for the tang of smoke was still heavy on the morning air.

Grunting, Moosewa turned, touched his strange companion with his heavy muzzle, then moved deeper into the timber and shortly was pulling down tender wild fruit shoots. Only recently had he been weaned. He fed awkwardly and his eyes blazed every now and then when he pulled in, by mistake, a tall wild rose shoot studded with tearing thorns.

Payuk was at a loss. He had not wholly been weaned. Now he had to function by sheer instinct. He rose and nibbled at the tender brows, but it was not his type of food.

He whimpered piteously as his belly gnawed.

Suddenly he froze, cocking his head. His nose began to twitch as his every nerve fiber grew taut and slack by turns. There was slight movement ahead. Payuk could now see it—a small creature not more than a length away. Payuk sank slowly, lowering his squat, chunky body, but bunching his paws under him, and then like a flash he sprang. His jaws snapped accurately on an unwary young red squirrel which had fallen from its nest high in a spruce.

Payuk chortled in ecstasy as he chewed and gulped this succulent morsel.

He whirled and began to sway in a swaggering gait about his long-legged companion. He had made his first kill. He was Payuk, the great one, the killer.

As he crowded in on the big bull calf, Moosewa swung and butted him, rocking him back.

Payuk had learned two lessons: He had learned how to make a kill, but also that Moosewa, his companion, had power in that great head.

Now the young bear turned and shuffled on through the light underbrush. He smelled the scent of wild fruit, and soon his muzzle was stained with berry juice.

He made soft voice sounds. He was calling Moosewa to the feast. . . .

But Payuk's education was by no means complete. His overstuffed belly soon began to feel the sharp pang of griping pain. He had gorged on poisonous berries. Again his sharp instincts, the heritage of his kind, came to his rescue. He began to regurgitate. He rolled on the ground, massaged his stomach and forced himself to retch again and again. . . . But not until the soft summer night swathed the scarred wilds of Desolation Valley, did Payuk feel able to follow on in Moosewa's tracks as the young bull calf ambled on toward a small creek, to drink.

Payuk drank, and retched again, but shortly his stomach had ceased to rebel. He drank his fill.

He was standing in the riffles of the creek, when suddenly he saw the silvery flash of many darting shapes. He whimpered, for the tang of running fish was pleasing.

Moosewa, however, found no attraction in such creatures. He turned. He would bed down in a small glade in the timber.

Grunting, he moved on, leaving his companion still pondering the movement of those silvery creatures.

Suddenly Payuk found himself alone. He whirled, stumbled on a slippery rock and fell headlong into deep water. His cries went unheeded by Moosewa.

Payuk had to swim only a few strokes before he reached a solid sandbar, but in those few moments, he panicked. Out on the bank he shook the water from his coat, then squealed for Moosewa, but there was no answering sound.

Shortly, nose close to the ground, Payuk picked up the calf's scent and scurried on,

tumbling over windfalls, recovering only to stumble again and again in his haste to catch up.

At last he entered the small haven glade where a wild snort from Moosewa startled him, but he recovered and shuffled in, to circle a few times before flopping almost against the back of the recumbent calf.

Noses into wind, the great ears of Moosewa ever alert, the two orphans bedded down in this, the first night of their enforced companionship, while about them Nature attempted to soothe the hurts of the fire-ravaged wilds with the soft breath of a warm night breeze. While all along Desolation Valley grown creatures of the wild, and young, searched in vain for lost kindred. . . .

TIME passed and wrought great changes for the young orphans. Because of his inherent urge for adventure, young Payuk had gotten himself into many a tight situation before the coming of the fall frosts. Often, too, he had drawn the more timid Moosewa into these situations with him.

Payuk it was who snarled his challenge at the beautiful black-and-white-striped creature, who suddenly sprayed him and the surrounding area with a blinding, nauseating vapor.

Moosewa bellowed thickly and whirled away; but recovering from the first shock, young Payuk coughed. He shook his head, pawed at his eyes, then suddenly tore into action.

Lok, the adult skunk, who had demanded and received right of way from huge adult grizzlies, was now faced by a small hurricane force that seized him almost before he could recharge and press into action his devastating spray.

His body was cut in two, but not even then did young Payuk cease his attack. He chewed as he coughed gutturally, and not until the striped one was a limp pulp in his jaws, did he toss the distasteful creature from him. . . .

Strange, indeed, are the ways of the wilderness folk. No other creature, no adult creature, would have dared to rush Lok as Payuk had rushed. It was as though Payuk's comparatively small brain had summoned up the logic of reasoning that since he was already drenched, he could suffer no further.

Now he whirled and rolled in the dewy grass, clawing, retching, slobbering in his sickness. . . .

This was his first major adventure since the fire, his first big kill, however foolhardy and immature his action had been.

For upwards of an hour, he stood belly deep in a creek and allowed the current to wash his coat, but for all that night, and for many days and nights following, especially after a light rain, Payuk whined and moaned, for that horrible stench still lingered. . . .

Moosewa had taken himself off, to run his face repeatedly into the soft spagnum mosses of a muskeg, cleansing himself.

If there was one creature in the wilderness that defied Lok, the skunk, he was Tarat, the wolverine.

Thus it was, when he curled his evil mouth at the tang of skunk, he expected a skunk along to investigate a recent small kill which Tarat guarded with all his bluff and fighting power.

Tarat was in for rude shock when suddenly there thrust through the nearby brush the heavy round head of a young grizzly, trailed by a gangling moose calf.

PAYUK came up sharply. Here was another striped creature, a larger type, whose mask was now hideous as Tarat snarled his threats.

In his innocence, Payuk did not realize that he faced one of the greatest of all fighters in the wild country.

Payuk rose to his full height and gave out an immature roar. His small eyes flashed red as he flailed the air with his heavy forepaws.

The wind was wafting to him the fear sweat stench of his companion Moosewa, but he could not know that this scent should have warned him of danger.

Payuk had, some days ago, made a kill. He was the great one. Here, before him, was a greater challenge to his battle power.

Suddenly he dropped and hurled himself forward.

Tarat, the evil, wise one, coiled and set his battery of four sets of roweling talons to work—claws that drew blood with every downward stroke.

Bawling, young Payuk backed off. He half swung as though to appeal to Moosewa for aid, but the young bull calf was already backing discreetly away.

Tarat, the wolverine, suddenly snarled and flung himself forward. Payuk turned a broad shoulder to the attack, then like lightning swung his head in, his fangs slashing.

His stroke was accurate, but he had bitten after the manner of the dog—a quick snap with jaws opening and closing without an attempt to tear like the wolf.

Tarat bled. He rocked back and commenced to circle this belligerent young hellion. His screeches and snarls began to have their effect. He was in so close, young Payuk could see the fire in those fierce eyes.

When Tarat at last leaped, Payuk coiled away and went plunging on into the brush.

Moosewa led on toward the creek, whose midstream vegetation, here and there near the neck of the lake, he loved best.

Payuk laved his deep wounds, stanched the blood flow at a shallows. Then suddenly, he caught the splash and flash of silver at the riffles and realized that the fall fish run was on.

He moved in and poised himself. Then suddenly his head bobbed, his jaws snapped, and a struggling northern pike flapped helplessly in the young silvertip's mouth.

Proudly Payuk waded to the flat bank and, forgetful of his wounds, began to feast. He ate with the delicate skill of his mother, stripping the meat from the sharp bones.

He had barely finished this, his first meal of fish, when a deep-throated roar sounded.

Payuk whirled, and froze as a huge black she-bear rose from behind a fringe of low scrub brush.

Two handsome cubs trailed the old black. They came scrambling through the brush.

Payuk snuffled softly and whined. Here were creatures of his kind and age. He advanced. The old she-bear stopped him dead in his tracks with a terrible roar.

He was without understanding. Immature, he could not know that this species of his kind hated the grizzly. In fact, old Mukwa, the she-bear, hated all other creatures who might become a menace, a threat to the safety of her cubs.

The cubs advanced toward the strange, squat grizzly cub. Payuk rose to his full height and whimpered softly. Taking this as an invitation to join in some sort of game, the blacks rushed, and in a flash three furry bodies were rolling and clawing together in a wild and roisterous mock battle.

Payuk, however, was suddenly afraid. He rose from the scramble, whirled and dealt one of the blacks a hard cuff behind the ear, sending him toppling into the creek. Instantly, with a savage bellow, the she-bear plunged through the brush. Payuk coiled. Although he was going away as the black's right forepaw struck him, his hind quarters sagged.

He dragged himself forward to the riffles as the she-bear was obliged to turn downstream and take care of her floundering cubling.

Whimpering with pain, Payuk shuffled on through the meadow, up into the brush, and then toward the timber, where he hoped to find his companion, Moosewa. But the young bull was nowhere in the vicinity.

Payuk was alone, alone with the misery of his hurt.

IT WAS much later in the year when next Payuk glimpsed young Moosewa, but the calf was not alone. Payuk had picked up moose scent that led him to a chain of willow-studded swales backed by heavy timber.

He was frightened when he glimpsed huge, antlered creatures—Moosewa's kindred. At once he was challenged, and quivered in fright as a cow moose rushed him.

It was not until Moosewa picked up his scent and identified him, that the alarm was off. Moosewa advanced and ran his heavy upper lip along the young grizzly's coat.

Later, they roamed a swale together, but Payuk found foraging much more difficult. The rodents had dug down deep into hibernation. He could not subsist on browse or vegetation, as did the moose.

The snows came and with their whistling came the howl of the wolf packs.

Payuk quivered. He was suddenly amazed to find that no longer did the big bulls carry those massive sets of antlers. These were gone. . . .

The wolves came fanning out from the hills as the heavy snowfall ceased and the drifts became packed.

Payuk shivered. He was instinctively aware that he had no place here in the open. It was past the time for hibernation of his kind. Yet, the big bulls were grunting and the evil eyes of the killer pack gleamed in the night. Payuk was not even a nocturnal creature. He bedded down by night and hunted or loafed by day.

Thus, when the first huge wolf struck, Payuk was completely out of cast. He shuddered, whimpered, as he saw the wolf leap and fang the big nose of a young cow moose.

The cow went down heavily, and as she struck, two more members of the gray pack were in, to fang hamstrings and throat. . . .

The tang of fresh blood was a welcome tang indeed to Payuk's nostrils. His belly growled. . . . But suddenly he heard a wild guttural blat. He whirled. A long, lean she-wolf was leaping toward Moosewa. . . .

Payuk snarled. He curled his lips back over his maturing fangs and rushed. He half rose out of a small clump of green willow and struck.

His powerful blow was well timed, accurate. The she-wolf went down, but Payuk did not stop. Eyes flashing red, he rushed and bit, rushed and bit, and now, not more than a rod away, young Moosewa reared to strike down like lightning at the back of another marauder. . . .

Shortly, the fight was done. The price of victory for the dead moose had been high.

A big bull grunted and cows herded the young stock on to another meadow, away from the blood tang. But young Payuk minced about a kill, chortling in wild ecstasy. Here, for the taking, was food—food with which to build quick tallow under his hide, tallow to last him throughout the hibernation period. . . .

When at last, a week later, Payuk found a natural cave, he was hog fat and ready for the long sleep.

He curled himself in his haven, after having done some digging and arranging.

Off in the distance a lone wolf wailed, but Payuk merely grunted. He heard the stomp of moose hoofs like muffled drumbeats, but he settled himself to the long rest, while the grim drama of the wilds went on by night and by day, as the stark Bitter Roots took on their heavy snow cloaks and Desolation Valley had its terrible fire scars hidden. . . .

A great horned owl gave out his eerie, blood-chilling cry from a nearby swamp. Small birds and furry creatures scuttled to cover. This was truly a land where the

fittest survived. It was the code of the wilds since the birth of time, and it would go on, until Payuk reached maturity and beyond. . . .

PAYUK reached his full swaggering maturity, but not without many a battle, as he built up to an education of the ways of the wild folk on his own. His school was hard, for he had had no parents to coach him.

Thus he came into his fifth year, weighing close to eight hundred pounds, his sides marked by the white hairs which covered old scar tissue, the marks of fang and antler.

Today, Payuk weaved about one of his old haunts, a small lake where he enjoyed sunning himself, as he watched the wild ducks and grebes scutter about, flashing their gaudy spring plumage, sending sprays of silver from the water as they flapped their wings in their mad gambol.

All at once, the now big Payuk became electrified as he watched a big bull moose enter the water on stilted legs. A huge set of perfectly formed antlers crowned the massive head of the moose.

Years before he had trailed or led young Moosewa, with whose scent he was most familiar. It had lingered in his nostrils long after he had lost sign of his companion.

Now, it returned. The instincts of Payuk were even sharper than most of his kind, for he had had them sharpened by his experiences, battling his way through his youth alone.

He watched that great moose head dip below the water, then rise. Two great nostrils snorted, blowing a stream of water. Head high, Moosewa set his grinders to work on lily roots.

Payuk champed his jaws until the foam started flecking. He eased his big form into the shallow marshy water at the sedges. Into a mind, soured by the sharp experiences of the past few years, had grown a bitterness toward all creatures, yet there came to him now a strange, unaccountable sense of desire for companionship.

He whimpered softly.

Moosewa flung his ponderous head high and coughed.

His eyes were ablaze as he watched the big silvertip wading in the sedges.

Payuk quivered. So far, he had had no encounter with a bull moose, nor did he know at this moment that the huge Moosewa was frightened—frightened because his massive antlers could only form a strong bluff, since they were in their most tender velvet stage, useless as battle armament.

Payuk raised his large head and wove it on its short thick neck as he gave out strange voice sounds.

He backed away now as the big bull turned and pulled his stilted legs toward shore. Now on the solid meadow ground, Moosewa blew sharply.

He stood in all his grandiose majesty, a tower of great fighting strength in the eyes of Payuk. But had the wind favored Payuk, he might have caught that sharp fear sweat stench.

They stood and glared at each other, neither venturing a step forward. They were aliens, enemies; creatures which once had been bedfellows.

Suddenly brush crackled off to Payuk's right. He half rose as a grizzly cub, a swaggering youngster, came out of timber.

It was then that Moosewa made a move. He minced forward, halted, stomped his forehoofs. Then with a deep grunt he rushed, reared and struck down.

The cub screamed as he rolled over.

Out of the thicket, bawling fiercely, rushed the cub's mother—a low, heavy-set she grizzly.

The wilderness was shaken now by her roars. Moosewa was frozen to immobility.

Payuk weaved from side to side, as his great jaws champed with mounting agitation.

In all the wilds there is no more savage creature than a she-grizzly whose young have been molested.

She lost no time in attacking.

Moosewa lost footing as he backed away. His hind hoofs sank in an old muskrat run. In his effort to recover, he buckled at the foreknees as the she-grizzly half rose, and with a throaty roar lashed out with her right forepaw.

Moosewa was down. Blood spouted from the base of a broken-off antler.

It was then the she-bear whirled. A shifting wind had brought her the scent of Payuk.

Payuk well knew the wrath and fighting power of a female of his species. He turned and ambled away, grunting.

Inwardly he was happy, for a potential mate had come to this new range he had chosen in the lowland. Next year, perhaps, he might seek her out.

NOW, on a ridge, Payuk whirled and rose.

Moosewa was moving around the sedges, walking with a queer limp to his long-legged, stilted gait. As well, he carried his ponderous head on one side—a king of his kind whose crown was smashed.

With the small lake between him and his attacker, Moosewa entered the water and dipped his great wounded head, while Payuk watched, batting his small eyes.

The big grizzly was stirred by this new adventure. Today he had gone in innocence to the lake, to tang the scent of his former gangling trail companion. He had witnessed the tremendous power of one of his own kind and it inspired him, for Moosewa, the bull, had outweighed the she-grizzly. He had towered above her, a grandiose creature with majestic head and antlers—yet he had gone down. He had lost, in a single blow, the power of his antlers. He had become reduced in his own kingdom to a creature that might never regain his powerful status.

Payuk grunted. The action of the she-grizzly had inspired him to realize more fully his own great fighting strength and majesty. He blew sharply, reared to his full height and roared a challenge to all creatures of his new, lowland range—all save the irate female of his species.

Payuk had reached his prime, and up on his favorite shelf he sat and surveyed the sweeping terrain below. Then he blew contemptuously, and whirled to resume his foraging.

WITH the coming of late autumn, Payuk sensed the need for greater feeding. He must get tallow under his thick hide.

He moved on down to the rolling, timber- and brush-belted ridges, the scent of deer strong in his nostrils.

All creatures scurried from his path. He was the accepted chieftain of this area of the Bitter Roots country.

Payuk, however, was not the only creature on the hunt trails. He came to a sudden halt, his eyes flashing red as he caught the hated scent of big cat.

Acheeta, the queen cougar, and her kindred were interested in the bucks and bulls, or in any of the deer family.

The first ashes of dusk were being slowly sifted down on the wilds. Payuk's sight was not suited to night hunting.

He quickened his pace as the cat scent grew more freshly blended with the tang of deer, or moose.

He crossed a hogback ridge, crouched low in his shambling gait, taking advantage of the wind and every tuft of cover.

Suddenly he halted, freezing. A series of sharp grunts arrested him. They were the grunts of an antlered creature in distress.

Slowly Payuk moved in on a draw, careful lest his great pads crackle too many dead leaves. Now he halted, his body weaving though he neither advanced or retired.

Two long, tawny cougars were circling a big bull moose.

That strange sense of identity quickened Payuk's heart beats. . . . There, standing frozen in the draw bottom, his sides gaunt and hollow, his head tilted, was Moosewa, the one-antlered bull.

Now a cat spun in and leaped. With a wild snarl, the second lion, Acheeta's mate, or perhaps a big son, rushed from the rear.

Payuk was less concerned with Moosewa's fate than with a sense of challenge by these tawny killers.

He roared as he hurled himself into battle.

Acheeta spun away. She coiled, then whipped to one side with an agility that was too smart for Payuk's bulk.

The cougars began to circle, their long tails switching, but Payuk, though he turned with them, ever facing them, made no movement forward or back.

Suddenly Acheeta feinted with a long leap.

Payuk was wise. He offered only a token defensive action—a growl, and a slash of empty air with a forepaw. He was conscious of the lurking shape at his back.

Suddenly that shape, the big, young male lion, stretched, and in that instant Payuk whirled and struck.

There was no mistake. His massive right forepaw had been well timed in its smashing stretch and hook.

The mountain lion screeched as it fell, its head mashed to a pulp, vertebrae dislodged.

Acheeta, however, had leaped to attack. Her fangs ripped at the side of Payuk's neck before he could whirl to counter-attack. Again she stretched. She cleaved the air in a superb, graceful spring that carried her to the grizzly's broad back. Instantly her talons and fangs sank, but Payuk, moaning with pain, rushed toward a cottonwood, in under its lowest branch. . . . Acheeta was scraped off. She dropped lightly to the ground, screaming her frustration.

Payuk whirled, to meet her coming in, and his great forepaws lashed out savagely. She dropped, and disregarding the tearing power in those claws and the mighty strength of her fangs, Payuk rushed forward and slashed at her throat.

Low, guttural sounds came rattling from her throat. She rose and attempted to strike, but Payuk batted her down, broke her back. . . .

Disdainfully, he snarled as he whirled away, satisfied that she would not recover.

Suddenly he cocked his head. There was a stir in the undergrowth. Whirling, his every sense electrified, he saw dimly the great lumbering form of Moosewa stealing from view.

PAYUK whirled and smashed at a willow clump. He then rushed forward, but Moosewa was in full stride, running hard against the wind, his cumbersome head drooped over to one side.

Payuk whimpered softly. He rose to his full height, his sides billowing as his keen sense of smell allowed him to follow Moosewa's trail.

Now he swung to the rear and froze. Out of a fringe of second-growth aspen and wild-fruit growth, a young buck came thumping, hard pursued.

Payuk crouched. His every nerve became taut as he bunched. Then suddenly he hurled himself in, with a speed that shocked the buck back on his haunches.

Grimly, powerfully, the king grizzly struck with speed and accuracy, and shortly he crouched feeding over the buck.

As the silent night closed over the wilds, Payuk lay grunting with contentment. He tanged the scent of wolves on the deer's back trail, but not even a single pair of eyes gleamed through the deepening gloom. Payuk was rightly a monarch, and until his present kill was consumed he would mount guard—and the creatures of the wilds would instinctively sheer off. . . .

Yellow Stripe of Honor

By WILLIAM L. JACKSON

TWENTY-FOUR men were in the detail when they entered the pass, twenty-four weary men in a loose column. At the head of the detail, Lieutenant McCord knew that his report to the fort would be that the redskins were gathering in force; and he wondered why a de-

Was Trooper Mickey a big enough man to be deaf to the whispers that branded him with the cruelest stigma of the frontier fighting man: "Regimental Coward?"

Rankin's shot lifted one brave from the saddle, the other was brought down by Clancy

tail had to ride fifty miles to discover this when any damn' fool could see what was in the wind by watching the Indians disappear from about the post.

The lieutenant saw the mouth of Dead Man's Cave in the pass ahead, and he knew that they were within ten miles of the fort. He led the column forward and had a long thought of the luxurious bath he'd take when they got back to quarters.

This was his last thought. He was the first man hit by the fire which came suddenly from the rocky slopes above them. He went down and the detail milled helplessly as troopers tried to get out of the center of fire. Every rock seemed to be a breastwork for an Indian, and the racket of their sudden firing and whooping set cavalry horses to pitching.

In the center of the disorganized troops, Sergeant Bob Rankin looked into Lieutenant McCord's dead face and knew he was now in command. He rose high in his stirrups and his leather-lunged roar swelled above the noise of the fighting. "Pull out!" he yelled. "Bring those wounded and form up in the cave!"

He knew this was what the Indians wanted, but there was no other way to get out of their chopping fire without cutting the detail to pieces. Rankin's carbine grew hot in his hands, and the ground about him was torn by whining slugs. He felt his horse catch it twice, and he leapt clear as the big bay went down. He was the last man to reach the cave.

Inside, he counted fifteen men still standing, two men down, wounded.

Dead Man's Cave was a recess which ran far back into the hillside. Its opening was a hole roughly fifteen by thirty feet, large enough for a man to ride into, and inside the cave widened into a mammoth cavern with many adjoining branches.

"McGinnis, Clancy, get those horses back out of range," Rankin said. "You others form a skirmish line up here. Get the wounded back where it's cooler."

With these initial tasks done, they waited for the attack. It would be suicidal to run a wedge of riders against this line of guns, but Rankin knew that it would be done. The Indians would know that they were expected at the fort, and there could be no starving out of these victims. The sun was starting to drop into the hills but they would have time for one bloody attempt before dark.

While they waited, Rankin turned his sharp gray eyes upon the men about him in shrewd appraisal. Near him, McGinnis and Clancy were flat behind a dead horse, the center of the line was composed of men he had fought beside before, and the far end was held by men who were seasoned soldiers. There would be a wicked crossfire for any Indian who reached the mouth of the cave.

Rankin's eyes swung again to the center of the line, and his lips drew thin. He saw Private Lute Mickey turn his eyes away, and he hated this big man, the only soldier in the regiment whom Rankin would brand as a coward. The thought of a slim, fair-skinned boy now dead touched Rankin's mind, and he could see the name of Private James M. Rankin on the regimental honor roll which hung in the general's office. He was proud of that name being there, but the thought of it revived an old ache in his chest and forced a silent curse for Lute Mickey from his lips.

MICKEY was a huge rock of a man, six foot five and broad as an ox. His chest and shoulders were immense, and his arms were as thick as the legs of many men. His hands could grasp a man like a bear trap, and he could lift nearly anything he could lay hold of. With more inside him, he would have been a fighting man to match anything that walked.

But the guts, Rankin thought, were not there. For his money, that had been proved when Jim Rankin had died. No one had suspected such a lacking in Mickey before

that time. He had been respected by every man in the outfit, and he had worn the stripes of a sergeant on his meaty arm.

The day that Jim had died the outfit had been in a fix almost as bad as this one, with more men involved. They had been engaged in a battle with more than three hundred Indians, in a rough and rocky country which would not allow the best from mounted troops. They had fallen back and driven toward the rim of a broad plateau, and thirty good men had died in the ascent, making targets of themselves in their desperate effort to regroup.

Three men had been assigned to flank guard action in a narrow, winding defile which led to the rim of the plateau, to stop a band of savages determined to reach the top before the soldiers. One of these men had gone down in the rocks, and another had stayed on in the face of certain death to break the back of the Indians' attempt. The third man had left his fighting comrades behind him and reached the safety of the rim.

The man left behind was Sergeant Rankin's son, the man who reached the rim safely Lute Mickey. Mickey's face was white as the face of a dead man when they reached him, and he mumbled that he had thought the others were with him. He said that he had thought the Indians had turned back—and he could not meet Sergeant Bob Rankin's angry eyes.

They made their way down the slope after the battle, and they found the body of James Rankin and his comrade, surrounded by Indian corpses. "I never knew," Lute Mickey said pitifully. "I thought we had them stopped. There must have been another bunch in the rocks."

"Ride on," Rankin said bitterly. "Your skin is whole. I won't need your help to bring him in." Mickey's eyes turned away again, and he rode off in silence.

When they reached the post Mickey got drunk, and he tore up the sutler's place until it looked as if a detail had gone through on horseback. He lost his stripes; but the word had gone around, and no man believed that he really lost them for drunkenness.

But now Rankin could think of these things no more. He heard the Indians in the pass, and then he saw them, coming in a yipping hell-for-leather band. Over his rifle he watched them, and he said, "Hold off until they hit that string of red rock."

The Indians came on in loose-strung waves, and their first wild shots sang inside the cave. The leading wave struck the edge of the red rocks, and the fire from the cave met them. This first rank went down like wheat before a scythe, horses running wild and riderless, but the others came on.

The firing from the cave became a steady roar, and the air grew hazy with powder-smoke. Rankin heard the *thunk* of bullets into flesh beside him, and he threw up his gun to fire rapidly as two Indians made the inside of the cave. His shot lifted one brave from his saddle, and the other was brought down by Clancy. They both fell within five feet of Rankin, their horses going on through the cavalry line.

It seemed as if they would never stop coming, and then the silence was a sudden, shocking thing as the remaining braves wheeled and pulled away, beaten off. Talking started along the line of soldiers, and Rankin turned to count the dead and wounded. He counted four men down and another wounded, and he knew that his line could never hold against another such onslaught.

"It'll be dark in another half hour," he said. "They won't be coming in again until morning. I want the wounded hauled back into the cave."

RANKIN now assigned to three men the task of moving and covering the dead, and he distributed the carbines which were now spares along the line to men who could use them best. He built himself a cigarette and dragged deeply at its dry and bitter

smoke, listening to the low murmur of weary talk along the line, wondering if they could at least get a good night's rest before the attack came in the morning.

Then he turned, throwing his cigarette away as the detail which had carried the wounded back into the cave returned. "My God, Sergeant," one of the men said excitedly, "I think we found a way out of this place. There's a hole back there at the end of one of the passages. We saw a light and followed it. We'll have to move some rocks, and it ain't big, but a man might be able to squeeze through."

Rankin nodded at McGinnis. "I'll take a look. Take over here, Mac."

They reached the end of a long and winding passage and Rankin saw the hole in the wall. It was four feet above floor level, and its mouth was partially blocked by a jagged three-cornered slab of rock and numerous smaller rocks and rubble. As it was now, it couldn't be more than a foot in width. Outside a bush grew almost exactly in front of the opening.

"It's damned small," Rankin said, "and I'm not sure we've got enough men to move that boulder. If we could, what would we do when we got through, on foot?"

"Not so loud, Sergeant," a wounded man said. "Look through there and you can see what we'd do if we got through."

Rankin stepped up to the hole, trying to peer through the branches of the bush outside. His eyes widened and his hands went white on the big boulder. Not a hundred yards away in the dusk outside stood a cavvy of Indian horses, hobbled and guarded by one white haired brave.

"They must belong to the Injuns on foot up on the ridge," the wounded man said. "We could beat them to the herd easy if we got the herder. We'd have a chance after dark."

Another wounded man on the floor of the cave turned hopeful eyes toward Rankin. His hands were black from grubbing about the base of the big boulder. "We can do it, Sergeant," he said. "This boulder ain't hooked to the ground, and a lot of the stuff in that hole is just shale. It would be just about big enough for a man to squeeze through if we cleared her back to the solid rock."

Rankin nodded. "No light and no talking. I'll get some more men." He walked to the mouth of the main cavern and softly forwarded the news to the men there. He singled out three men. "You stay here and shoot at anything that even makes a noise out there. The rest of you come with me."

They walked through the passage in silence. Night was falling outside, and the inside of the cave was already dark. They reached the boulder-blocked hole and one of the men who had remained here with the wounded came down from on top of the big rock slab. "I got a lot of it out, Sergeant," he said, "but the hole's still too small, and even that shale is pretty solid."

Beside Rankin, big Lute Mickey said quietly, "I'll have a try at it." He climbed the boulder, and they could hear his huge hands tearing at the shale inside the hole. He dug steadily for fifteen minutes and then said, "There, most any man can slip through there now if we can move this big one out of the way."

Rankin said nothing as the big man came to the floor of the cave; but he heard Mickey grunt in pain as he touched another man, and this man said, "My God, Mickey, you've torn your hands to pieces."

"They're all right," Mickey said. "Let's have a try at this big one."

They grouped themselves around the rock slab which was flat against the cavern wall, and Rankin felt the bodies crowding his own go tight as they strained at the boulder. The pulling continued, and Rankin felt the faint movement of the boulder beneath his hands. It moved a mere fraction of an inch and then fell into place again.

Lute Mickey's voice was hoarse in the darkness. "You two men here trade places

with me. I can't get a good hold." They moved, and Mickey said, "Okay. Once again."

MICKEY was next to Rankin now, and Rankin felt the big man's shoulders knot against him and heard the sobbing sound of Mickey's breathing. He felt the force in the big man through his shirt, and the effort which Mickey was putting forth. And the rock moved. An inch it moved, then another, and another, until its one edge was perhaps ten inches from the wall.

But the corner which blocked the small and jagged passage to freedom was still tight against the wall, and there was not room for a man to squeeze through and bend himself into the hole. The moon was rising outside, and in this dim light Rankin saw Mickey bend forward, nursing his hands and trying to catch his breath. Rankin could guess how those hands felt after such a pressure on their bleeding fingers.

Now Mickey could get one arm and shoulder behind the slab. He placed his powerful upper body in this position, and the others re-gripped the big rock. Mickey's pent-up breath escaped slowly as he pushed with all the strength in his big body, and the other men bent and tugged with every ounce left in them. The rock slab scraped slowly away from the wall, and Mickey said, "That's it, boys. You can all slip through there now."

They went back on their heels now, trying to regain lost strength, and Rankin said, "Clancy, can you take care of that herder?"

Clancy's teeth flashed in the dim light, and he flexed his hands. He pulled himself up on top of the rock slab and slipped into the hole, scraping his body on either side. They saw him for a moment in the moonlight outside, then he disappeared.

They waited for him in silence, and not a sound reached them from outside until the Irishman's grinning face suddenly appeared in the opening again. "All set," he said softly. "The old buck was the only one with the herd. This moonlight's bad, though. We better move fast."

Rankin gave his rapid orders, and three men went through the hole to join Clancy on the outside. Then the wounded were helped through, and the able men on the outside went off with them toward the horses. It would be a hard ride for them, but there was no other way.

A man was sent to the main cavern for McGinnis and the others there, and these men in turn went through the escape hole. Lute Mickey held back as man after man went through, until he was standing alone with Rankin.

"Okay, Lute," Rankin said, "up and out with you."

He sensed more than saw Mickey's tight smile in the darkness. "Get out yourself, Sergeant," Mickey said. "I won't be going. I thought you could see that. Clancy could hardly get through that hole."

Only now did it strike Rankin, drawing his lips tight and making him curse himself for not seeing it sooner. The hole was too small. Lute Mickey, with his ox-like thickness and broad shoulders was too much man to crawl through. The big man had admitted it previously when he had said, "There, most any man can slip through there now." Most any man, yes, but not himself.

And still the big man had worked his heart out in moving the big rock so the others could get out. Rankin stood silently beside Mickey now, and all of the things which he had thought of the big man ran through his mind and he knew he had been wrong. Lute had told the truth about his actions on that day of battle when Rankin's boy had died. He must have, or where could he have gotten the guts to do what he had just done?

Rankin said, "I'm sorry, Lute," and he knew it wasn't enough.

"Get going, Sergeant," Mickey said. "I never held a thing against you, and I don't

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By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

The Girl on

Chapter I

AMBUSH

IT WAS a dusty Phip Callahan forking a sweat-stained horse who rode into Cherry Wagner's place on Cougar Creek at dusk. He'd left Gunnison early that morning and had piled up more miles than a man should have to ride in a day, but time was of the essence. He dismounted, his gaze sweeping the familiar scene; the dark bulk of the roadhouse, its lamplighted windows staring at him like unblinking yellow eyes, the low log barn, the scattered sheds, the network of corrals.

"Don't go yelling around, or I'll blow his backbone in two!"

Colorful Novelette of the Mining Country

Cougar Creek • •

Phip watered his horse at the trough, stooping to drink from the pipe, and as he straightened, old Frank Hays, Cherry's handyman, came from the barn, a lantern swinging from his hand. He asked, "Staying overnight, mister?"

"You bet I am, Frank," Phip said.

Hays held the lantern high, its light falling across Phip's wide, freckled face. "Oh, hell, I guess my eyes are getting bad. Didn't recognize you, Phip."

"It's me right enough," Phip said. "How's business?"

"Good. Too good." He paused, then added with some bitterness, "I'm doing two men's work, but Cherry can't get no-

Phip Callahan's bid for the Cougar Creek stage station must top that of a power-hungry gun-combine, which was offering a cold cash bonus for lovely Cherry, as well!

body else to help out around here."

"You know what gold does to a man, Frank. Nobody wants to work for wages when he hears about the strikes they're making down the creek."

"Yeah, that's right. Sometimes I wonder why I stay. Not that I'm thinking of quitting, mind you. I'll stick as long as Cherry needs me."

There was a moment of silence except for the rattle of dishes from the roadhouse kitchen and the distant growl of the creek as it tumbled down from the high country to the east. Phip said, "Guess Brownie's got his fill. 'Got a vacant stall?"

"Sure. Half a dozen tonight."

Phil followed the old man into the barn. Hays hung his lantern near the door and motioned to the third stall. "In there. I'll get some oats." Phip stripped his brown gelding, dropped the saddle onto a peg, and rubbed the horse down. Hays had returned to stand in the runway, a tired, stooped old man, the murky light of the lantern falling across him.

Phip gave his horse a pat, thinking of Cherry Wagner as he did most of his waking hours. He didn't understand her and he wondered if it was given to any man to really understand the woman he loved. He wondered, too, if Cherry would ever be serious about a man, and if she did, whether he would be the man. But that was not the immediate problem that had brought him. He had come this time strictly on business, and the prospect was not a pleasant one. He had never had much luck doing business with a woman.

"I reckon you figger to sign Cherry up," Hays said somberly.

Phip stepped from the stall into the cone of light falling from the lantern. He was a medium tall man, red-headed, with pale blue eyes puckered by the sharp Colorado sun. His was a practical face, disciplined by years of hard work. Now, not yet thirty, he had what he wanted at last, a partnership with Matt Lane in the Colorado Stage and Freight Company, a small business but one that was rich with promise. There was striking irony in the fact that Cherry Wagner held the future of the C.S. and F. in the hollow of her slim-fingered hand.

"I aim to try," Phip said. "Think she's ready to sign?"

"Damned if I know," Hays said. "Sometimes I just can't make her out. Talks a lot about women's rights."

"Maybe Gale's in the way."

"I reckon he is at that. Anyhow, he's here, talking smooth and sweet the way he does, and all dressed up like he was going to a funeral."

Something tightened inside Phip Callahan. He knew Randy Gale, knew him too well. He muttered, "It may be his funeral."

"Yeah, if you don't fix it for him, I will," Hays said. "I've stood by Cherry because her pappy was my best friend. He was on his death bed last spring when I promised him to stay on. But I dunno." He rubbed his leathery face. "I just dunno. Well, you better go in and eat."

PHIP understood how it was. Hays and Cherry's father had come to Colorado twenty-odd years ago with the rest of the fifty-niners; they had watched the disappointed go-backs return to their homes, cursing the stories they'd heard of Colorado's gold, but Frank Hays and Bill Wagner had stayed. Wagner had married and made his strike in Gregory Gulch, but Hays had had nothing but bad luck, and had wound up working for Wagner. Only two years ago Wagner had bought the toll road down Cougar Creek and built this layout. Then he'd died and everything had gone to Cherry.

There was nothing Phip could say which would ease the bitterness in the old man's heart. Cherry had made mistakes that could have been avoided if she'd listened to Hays, but she wasn't one to listen.

Phip said, "Might as well see if they

can rustle some grub, I reckon," and turned toward the door. That was when the gun sounded from the other end of the runway.

Phip felt the breath of the bullet, and wheeled, drawing his gun as he turned. Hays had been hit, but there was no time to look at him. Phip glimpsed the shadowy figure of the gunman. He fell flat into the litter of the stable floor as another shot came, the sound of it beating against the walls, thunder-loud in this confinement. Then Phip brought his gun into play, adding to the racket.

Phip laid two shots at the man, fast. The second was a waste of lead, for the bushwhacker had been slammed against the back wall of the stable by the first bullet. He bounced off and sprawled face down. Phip waited a moment, but there was no movement from the man. Hammer back, Phip lunged toward him, keeping low and taking a zig-zag course. Then he saw the gun three feet from the motionless body and slowed his pace, dropping his own .44 into leather. Kneeling, he turned the man over and flamed a match beside his face. It was Jupe Klein.

For a moment Phip knelt there. He knew Klein almost as well as he knew Randy Gale, a trigger-happy killer, hardly more than a boy, who had hung around the saloons of Canon City and Pueblo. It had been his brag that he'd have as many notches on his gun as Billy the Kid did by the time he was twenty-one. Phip was sure, or as sure as a man could be of something he couldn't prove, that Klein had belonged to Gale, but even if he had the proof he doubted that Cherry would believe him.

Remembering suddenly that Hays had been hit, Phip rose and ran back along the runway to him. "Take it easy," Hays said. "He just tagged me in the shoulder."

Hays had pulled himself into a sitting position and was leaning against the wall. Phip said, "Let me have a look."

It was a flesh wound in the old man's left shoulder, a ragged hole that was bleeding badly. By the time Phip had wadded up a bandanna and pressed it against the wound, Cherry had come running out of the house with Randy Gale and half a dozen others. Cherry called, "What happened?" She came into the barn, recognized Phip, and in the same instant saw that Hays had been hit. "Frank, is it bad?"

"Naw. Randy, you oughtta have your boys practice before they try a set-up."

They crowded through the door, Gale's handsome face suddenly ugly. "What are you laying it onto me for, Frank? I didn't have anything to do with it."

"He's out of his head, Randy." Cherry motioned to the men. "Help him inside. Mamie will patch him up. She's as good as any doctor."

Gale stayed, scowling. When the rest had gone, he asked, "Who did it?"

"Klein."

"I don't believe it."

Phip motioned toward the other end of the runway. "Go have a look. He's there."

Gale took down the lantern and strode toward the dead man. Phip remained near the door, watching, and when Gale returned, "Believe it yet?"

"I believe what I see. Who'd he shoot at?"

"I wonder," Phip said.

Gale stood motionless, black eyes on Phip. Smooth, Phip thought, and handsome. Even now he seemed completely unruffled. He said, "Callahan, I'll have to kill you."

"This is a good time to try."

Gale shook his head. His mouth smiled, but his agate-black eyes were cold and menacing. "No, this ain't the time."

"Maybe later. A shot in the back."

"Maybe," Gale said.

"I reckon that explains who Klein was shooting at. Funny thing, Randy, I've had to fight someone ever since I was big enough to walk, but I never met up with

anybody before who had no honor about the way he fought."

"Honor?" The smile remained on Gale's lips. "What's that?"

"I wouldn't try to explain it to you."

"I know what it is, Callahan. A damned nuisance. I get what I want, and the way I get it ain't important."

"And you want Cherry?"

Gale shrugged. "My stage company needs this spot, Callahan. I aim to get it. If Cherry goes with the deal, why, that's all right."

Phip sucked in a ragged breath. "You won't kill me, Randy. Not if I kill you first." Wheeling, he strode out of the barn, and circling the pool of lantern light, went on to the house.

Chapter II

PAT HAND

PHIP had often wondered whether it had been foresight or plain fool luck which had prompted Bill Wagner to buy the Cougar Pass toll road and build this layout two years ago. The road had been little more than a goat trail over the Continental Divide, and there had been only a cabin and a log shed where the big roadhouse and barn stood now. But Bill had often bragged that all he had to do to strike gold was to stick a pick into the ground, so perhaps he had smelled the gold on down the creek. At any rate, the strike had been made, people had poured in, and within a matter of days, Bill Wagner could have sold out for ten times what he had paid. That's exactly what he would have done if he had lived. Now Cherry flatly refused to sell for any price.

When Phip came into the dining room, Mamie Decker, Cherry's cook, poked her head out of the kitchen. "Howdy, Phip. What'll you have, steak?"

"Sounds good." Phip hung his hat on a nail. "Thought you'd be with Frank."

Mamie shook her head. "I took a look at him. He didn't need my doctoring. Cherry can do it. Tough as a bootheel, that old varmint. Looked to me like his hide was so tough the bullet bounced off him."

Phip sat down and rolled a smoke. Mamie shoved wood into the firebox and there was the clatter of stove lids being dropped into place. A moment later he heard the sizzle of grease. Mamie poked her head out again. "Biscuits are plumb cold, Phip. Couldn't you get in here any sooner?"

"Stayed in the barn talking to Frank too long."

She drew back into the kitchen and presently came out with a thick steak fried the way she knew Phip liked it, biscuits, butter and a dish of grape jelly. She poured steaming coffee into his cup, set a thick slab of apple pie in front of him and dropped heavily into a chair across the table.

Mamie Decker was fat, forty and good-natured. She had gone through three husbands since she was fifteen, she was the best cook Phip knew, and she had been with the Wagners ever since Phip had known them. Like Frank Hays, she had stayed on with Cherry because Bill Wagner had asked her to. Now she leaned across the table, big hands folded. She said, "Phip, I'm worried."

"I'm going to eat," he said. "Go ahead and tell me about it."

"Nothing much to tell. It's just Randy Gale and Cherry. I'm scared he's going to smooth talk her into marrying him, and I'm pulling for you."

Phip grinned wryly. "Thanks, but it's not just a matter of marrying her, Mamie."

"I know. Well, I like Matt Lane, too. You boys need this spot. Cherry knows how it is." She shook her head. "Seems like Cherry just wants to try her wings."

"I reckon."

"Oh, Frank said it was Jupe Klein who tried to get you."

"That's right."

"Then Bucky Quinn must be around."

Phip nodded. "I didn't ask Randy. Didn't figger he'd tell me, but there's a good chance Bucky ain't far away."

"And he won't forget you drilled Jupe."

"I sure as hell ain't figgering on him forgetting anything."

Mamie rose. "It's a terrible country, Phip. Everyday I promise myself I'm going back to Iowa where folks don't go around shooting each other."

Mamie tramped into the kitchen. Phip finished his meal. Later, as he lingered over his second cup of coffee, Cherry came in. She stood in the doorway a moment, the lamplight full upon her. Phip pinned his gaze on her, telling himself she was the most beautiful woman in the world. She stood there, smiling as if sensing his admiration.

Cherry was a tall girl with dark brown hair and a warmly molded body that never failed to bring men's eyes to her. She had worn levis and a man's shirt when Phip had seen her in the barn, but since then she had changed to a freshly starched pink dress with a snug bodice and a skirt that made a tight fit around her hips. The dress had been carefully chosen, Phip guessed, and irritation stirred him as he wondered whether she had been thinking of him or Randy Gale when she had selected it.

"I didn't thank you," Cherry said, coming across the room to his table. "You saved Frank's life."

"Maybe I saved my own life. Maybe it wasn't Frank that Klein was shooting at."

She frowned. "Why would he shoot at you?" She shook her head. "No, it was Frank."

"Why would Klein shoot at Frank?"

"You know the answer to that. I'd have to sign up with somebody. I couldn't run this place without Frank."

"Meaning me? Or Randy?"

"I'm not meaning anything just yet, but I'll find out before long. Come upstairs. You're here to talk business and I'm ready."

He rose and came around the table to her. "That's why I'm here."

Smiling, she laid a hand lightly on his arm. "I'm a business woman, Phip, and I have the right to make the best deal I can. You're like most men. You think a woman should stay in the kitchen or sew or have babies, but the day is coming when a woman will do anything a man can."

"Anything?"

"Just about. Why, in Wyoming they've even given women the right to vote."

"A mistake," he said dryly.

THEY went up the stairs together, her hand still on his arm. He had never kissed her. He had never even told her he loved her, although she must have sensed his feeling for her. Until he had thrown in with Matt Lane he had always worked for someone else and she had been Bill Wagner's daughter, not rich perhaps, but well fixed by frontier standards. There had been that wall between them, a matter of pride with Phip Callahan and perhaps a foolish thing, but still very real.

He glanced at her, unsettled by her nearness and the soft pressure of her hand on his arm, and he wondered now, with her father gone and Frank Hays on his back, if she felt the need of a man's help. She had always been so sure of herself. Her remark about being a business woman was typical of that self-assurance.

They walked down the hall to the front corner room Bill Wagner had fixed as a parlor for her when he'd built the house. The furniture was walnut; the maroon rug and white lace curtains were expensive and had been carefully chosen in Denver. There was even a piano that had been freighted over the pass from Canon City.

She motioned toward a chair. "Sit down, Phip." Then, stepping back into the hall, she tapped on a door. "All right, Randy."

Mechanically Phip reached for paper and

tobacco, not liking this. Randy Gale came in, every black hair in place, his brown broadcloth suit immaculate. Phip needed a shave; his clothes, ordinary range duds, were dusty from the long ride from Gunnison. Alongside Randy Gale, he knew he looked like a saddlebum. It would be an important consideration in a woman's eyes.

"Sit down, Randy." Cherry moved to a desk, pulled a drawer and lifted a sheet of paper from it. "I have Randy's contract here. Have you drawn one up, Phip?"

"No."

"Then I guess I win the pot," Gale said coolly.

"Not till Cherry signs with you," Phip said. "Gale, I've been wondering about Klein's body. Did you take care of it?"

Gale's set smile faded. "Why should I?"

"It's been taken care of," Cherry said. "One of the freighters will take it to Gunnison." She sat down at the table in the center of the room. "Now all three of us know I hold a pat hand. I have the facilities a stage company needs for a home station. What's more, the toll you'd have to pay would break you unless you make a deal with me." She tapped the paper. "Randy came prepared with a contract. He owns the Pueblo and Western, you know, Phip. In other words, he has no partner to satisfy."

Phip fired his cigarette and scooted down in his chair. What she had said was true. Phip had a partner, and at times Matt Lane could be stubborn. It was his money that had launched the Colorado Stage and Freight Company. Phip's contribution had been his knowledge of the business and his willingness to do the riding and fighting. Matt could sit in his fine office in Canon City. If the C.S. and F. failed, he would lose nothing more than his dollars, but Phip could lose his life as he had very nearly done tonight.

"There is also the matter of a mail contract," Cherry went on. "I suspect that whichever one of you can prove to the government that you can stay in business and handle the mail will get the contract."

"That's right," Gale said. "You're smart as well as beautiful."

"Thank you, Randy." Cherry tapped the paper. "What's your offer, Phip? I suppose you and Matt decided on one?"

Gale plucked a long cigar from his coat pocket. "I'll promise you one thing, Callahan. Whatever your offer is, I'll top it."

"I might point out, Phip," Cherry said, "that next year the new camps down the creek will have ten times as many people as they have now. The company that signs with me will have a monopoly on a million dollar business." She sat back, slim fingers forming a steeple before her. "I don't aim to be a hog, Phip. I just want my share."

PHIP slouched in his chair, cigarette smoke curling up in front of his face. He was licked before he opened his mouth. He had everything lined up except this one spot, purposely holding it to the last because he had hoped Matt would sweeten the pot, but he had heard nothing from his partner. Before he had left Canon City, Lane had said, "You've known Cherry Wagner for years, so you ought to be able to wangle a good deal with her. Offer her anything up to five thousand. No more."

Phip got up and strode to a window. He tossed his cigarette stub through it and wheeled back. "Cherry, did it ever occur to you that there are some things in this deal that are worth more than the money involved?"

She laughed softly. "Randy has argued along those same lines. He's been here two days making love to me and promising to marry me." She shook her head. "I haven't been interested, Phip. The money looks good. I told you I aim to have my share."

There was no use to tell her that the company which signed with her might not make the million dollars she talked about so glibly, that there were risks which could not be foreseen, that there would be a big

payroll to meet and equipment to buy, and a possibility that other roads would be opened which might have an easier grade than hers. No, those things would mean nothing to her. She had to demonstrate that she was a business woman.

"Go ahead," Gale said. "Make your offer, Callahan."

"Just a minute." Phip came to stand across the table from Cherry. "I wasn't talking about making love to you."

Her eyes were on him, very dark and very lovely, and he was stirred as no other woman's eyes had ever stirred him. For just a moment the hardness dropped from her; the armor of her self-assurance seemed inadequate. She said very softly, "No, I didn't think you were talking about making love to me. It's just the money with you, too, isn't it? You and Matt Lane."

"No," he said more vehemently than he intended. "There's something else. You know me, Cherry, and you know Matt Lane by reputation. Mamie knows him very well. We'll keep any bargain we make. No lies. No cheating. No back shooting like happened tonight. Isn't that something to consider?"

Gale rose, cigar tilted up between his molars. "All right, Callahan. I wanted to save her this, but I can't. You've called. Make your play."

Phip made a half turn so that he faced Gale. There wasn't even a hint of a smile now on Gale's face; his dark eyes were as menacing as a thunderstorm blowing up over the Continental Divide. In Pueblo and Canon City they said Randy Gale was deadly fast with the gun he carried in a shoulder holster, but he seldom used it. Buying men like Jupe Klein and Bucky Quinn was cheaper and less dangerous than risking his own life. But now Klein was dead and Quinn was not around, so it was strictly up to Gale. His bleak face left no doubt of his intent.

"No," Cherry said sharply. "You're like two dogs with your hackles up and your teeth bared. I didn't call you in here to act like dogs. Sit down, Randy."

Just for a moment he stood glaring at Phip, cigar still held at that cocky angle. Then he swung to Cherry, bowing stiffly to her. "We *are* two dogs, Cherry. You might as well recognize it, but I was man enough to at least try to settle our differences away from you."

"You have a veneer of culture," she said tartly, "or perhaps you only pretend to have one."

He flushed. "That wasn't kind. I have great respect for a woman. I should think that would be more than a veneer." He spread his soft white hands. "At least I don't come to a woman in clothes I've lived in for months, smelling of sweat and horse. . . ."

Phip took two long strides toward him, but Cherry was between them, very angry. "I guess this wasn't a good idea. You're still acting like a dog, Randy, and dogs have no veneer at all."

"What I said was true, wasn't it?" he demanded.

"I've grown up in minings camps, Randy. I know men, I think. At least I know what Dad used to tell me is true. The difference between them is something inside that you can't see. You have to feel it. It's not the clothes they wear or the way their hair is combed."

Phip took her hand and turned her toward him. He said, "I'm sorry. I can't give you sweet talk like Gale, and I don't have any of that veneer you're talking about." He swallowed, searching for words that would not come. "I can't even say what I want to in front of him."

She smiled. "We'll take a walk along the creek, Phip. Maybe you can think of what you want to say." She picked up Gale's contract and put it back into the desk drawer. "I'll tell you what I'll do tomorrow, Randy. Wait till I get a wrap, Phip."

After she had gone, Phip asked, "Where's Bucky Quinn?"

"Around." Gale's smile was coldly mocking. "He was Jupe's friend, you know."

"I know," Phip said, and left the room.

IN THE front of the house was a small bar that opened into the dining room. While Phip had been eating supper he'd heard the steady run of talk from the barroom, the clink of glasses, the rattle of chips at the one green-topped poker table. Now the room was deserted. Even the lamps had been blown out. It struck Phip as being queer, for it was still early. Then he dismissed it from his mind, for most of the men he'd seen were freighters bound down-stream to the new camps and they would have to be on their way again before sun-up.

Phip went on through the barroom to the front porch and rolled a cigarette, thinking of what he'd say to Cherry. He had not expected it to go quite this way, for he knew now that the girl understood Randy Gale, and that surprised him. He'd taken it more or less for granted that Gale's smooth talk, fine clothes and grand manners had blinded Cherry to the man's real intent, but it wasn't so. Bill Wagner had been a shrewd, honest man, and regardless of her stubborn pride and self-assurance, those qualities had come down to his daughter.

She joined him a moment later, a shawl over her shoulders, a scarf around her head. It had been a warm, Indian summer day, but at this altitude the heat fled the moment the sun dropped from sight. Now the air held a sharp chill, a portent of winter that lay but a few days ahead.

"These freighters are making the last trip they'll make this year," Phip said. "You got all the supplies you need?"

"We're ready for a tough winter," she answered lightly. "You won't operate until spring?"

"No. Not the stages anyhow. If we have to bring in mail, a man will do it on Norwegian snowshoes."

They were silent a moment. There was no sound but that of horses kicking in their stalls, the roar of the creek in the canyon up-stream and the whisper of aspen leaves in the night breeze. She said, "Let's go down to the creek."

He put a hand on gun-butt, not liking it, for he remembered Gale's admission that Bucky Quinn was around. The man would make his try sooner or later, but probably not when Phip was with Cherry. He said, "All right," and gave her a hand down the step.

They walked across the yard and on through the aspens to the creek, angling up-stream. She said, "I'm waiting, Phip."

"All right." He took a long breath, trying to still the panic in him, for the knowledge was a pressing weight against his mind that if he did not make her see this thing as he saw it, both of them were ruined, and Matt Lane as well. "I can't offer you the money Gale did, Cherry. You see, this ain't a million dollar business as you think. I mean, it's a gamble. No one can be sure of what it is. These camps may peter out. Colorado's been full of strikes that look big one year and are nothing the next."

"I know that," she said.

"Matt ain't a young man. Maybe I did wrong, but I sold him the idea of pioneering stage lines. If we lose, he's wiped out. That's pretty tough for a man of Matt's age when he's put his life's savings into something."

"You can't convince me on the basis of sentimentality, Phip."

"I'm not trying to. I wanted to explain why we can't offer you what looks like a good deal alongside Gale's. If we make it for a few months and show a profit, we'll sell out to one of the big outfits. That's what Gale plans, too, whether he admits it or not." He paused, trying to think how to say it without forcing her into a position where she felt she must defend Gale. "Well, it's like I said. You know me and you

know Matt's reputation. We'll keep an agreement regardless. What I'm trying to say is that you'd be better off making less money and knowing you'd get it than signing with Gale."

"I see," she said coolly. "You're thinking of me."

"I'm thinking of all of us."

SHE was leaning against an aspen trunk, her face a pale oval in the darkness. He couldn't see her expression, but he felt he'd convinced her of nothing.

"There is a place for sentiment," she said finally, "and a place for business. I'm not in position to think about Matt Lane and his savings. You know as well as I do that there'll be a narrow gauge into this country before long. I've got to make my pile before then."

"It won't come until these mines show more permanence than they do now," he argued. "We're in position to send men to work here for you, men you can trust. They'll keep your road up and keep your corrals and barns in repair. All you'll have to do is to collect tolls from everybody else. You'll make plenty from your meals and bar and rooms. Frank will be able to take it a little easier, too."

"So he's been crying to you, too," she said. "Listen, Phip. I'm running this business. Not Frank. Not Mamie, either. If they don't like it they can quit."

"They won't," he said sharply. "You know that."

"Why? They don't love me that much."

"Maybe they do. Maybe it's on account of what they promised your dad. Either way, you can make a mistake that will wipe out everything you own. Loyalty is something you can't buy."

"Oh, hell!" she said in disgust. "You're trying to sell me a bill-of-goods on the basis of loyalty and promises made on Dad's death bed. I know all about those promises, Phip. I appreciate what Frank and Mamie have done for me, but that's got nothing to do with this. What I want from you is a figure that you'll offer for a year's use of the road and my facilities here at the roadhouse."

He could dodge it no longer. "All right," he said heavily. "Five thousand."

"Half of what Randy offers," she said derisively. "I think I'll just hold out and make my deal with the big company when it wants to come in here."

"The big boys don't gamble, Cherry. If you set too high a figure, they'll build their own road over the range."

"Then I'll sign with Randy."

He could think of nothing more to say. What had been panic a moment before was now a dull ache. He had believed in something, he and Matt Hale. Randy Gale's way was not their way. He could have recited chapter and verse to prove Gale's crookedness, but she wouldn't believe him. Nor would she believe that Gale had hired Jupe Klein's gun and posted him in the barn, knowing that Phip Callahan must come soon, for time was short. The mail contract would be given before long. Randy Gale had expected to get it by default, for Matt Lane wasn't man enough to run the C.S. and F. by himself.

There was this moment of silence. Then she said, "Maybe men are more alike than I thought. You don't believe a woman can manage a business. That's what it boils down to. You think the world runs on brawn and guns and violence. You think a woman has no place in it. Well, you make me tired. I'll show you you're wrong if it's the last thing I do."

He thought then of the one thing he hadn't said. Not that it would make any difference. She had misjudged him and his motives, and she would go on her own stubborn way until it was too late to take the right path. Still, he had to say it.

"I love you," he said. "I had a notion we could be partners, the toll road and the stage line. There will be some fighting to be done and I can do that. I can't run a

roadhouse, but you can. I thought our marriage could be a partnership, but I guess you don't see it that way."

"So you love me," she said witheringly. "That's the way Randy works."

HE WAS angry then, wildly and bitterly angry as he thought of the lonely nights he'd spent riding the high country or camped beside a fire with the spruce wilderness crowding him, of the hours he'd sat on the high box with the ribbons in his hands and tooled a Concord over the narrow mountain roads with a high cliff on one side and empty space on the other. Through those hours he had pictured her face, her dark hair and eyes, her graceful body, and he had dreamed of some day possessing her love. It was that dream which had driven him to Matt Lane, that dream which had given him the words to persuade Matt this business of pioneering stage lines could be made a profitable one.

The anger built a fire in him that he could not hold back. He had repressed it too long. A man can have his dreams and live by them for so long. Then if they are wiped out, there is nothing left, nothing for him to hold to or to live for.

He moved forward and put his arms around her. In that moment he was a crazy man, crazy with the want of her, hating himself for being a fool so long, hating her because she did not understand and had no faith in him.

He said fiercely, "You're the low one, Cherry. You're stubborn and you're selfish and you don't have sense enough to recognize a man's honest love when he offers it to you."

She struggled to break away from him, crying, "Stop it, Phip. Let me go."

But he didn't let her go. Not then. He kissed her, bruising her lips with his, holding her so hard she could hardly breathe. Suddenly she quit fighting him, her arms tightened around his neck and she was kissing him with the same passion that was in him. He felt the warm pressure of her breasts; he tasted the sweetness of her lips. It seemed to him that she could not get enough of him, but that was crazy. She must hate him. This wasn't the way he'd planned to kiss her; it had not been the way he had planned to tell her he loved her.

It was the gun pressed against his spine that jarred him back to reality, the sound of Bucky Quinn's soft voice, "I reckon she don't like that, Callahan. Let her go."

Phip dropped his arms and pushed her away. He had no illusions about Quinn. He had been a fool for coming out here, knowing the gunman was around. He said, "Go back into the house, Cherry."

For a moment she stood there, staring into the darkness at Quinn's tall form. "Who is it, Phip?"

"Bucky Quinn. Go on now."

"It's all right, Quinn," she said. "Leave us alone."

He laughed. "No, it ain't all right, ma'am. You go in. Don't go to yelling around, or I'll blow his backbone in two."

Phip said, "Do what he says."

She ran then. Presently Phip heard her steps on the porch and heard the door slam shut. Quinn pulled Phip's gun as he said, "We'll wait awhile, Callahan. We'll wait long enough for you to think about Jupe."

"He had a chance," Phip said.

"You haven't," the gunman said. "No chance at all."

Chapter III

FLAME OF GUNS

THERE are times in a man's life when he feels the imminence of death and each moment becomes a year. In this brief span that he waits for the end to come, he relives the high spots of his life, the mistakes and the disappointments, the victories and the satisfactions that come from worthy accomplishments. It was so with Phip Callahan, but there was the one big disappoint-

ment that overshadowed everything. Cherry hadn't believed he really loved her.

There was no measuring of time in Phip's mind. For some reason he couldn't define, the hope that a moment before had been completely dead was revived. He could think and move. As long as he possessed those powers, there was a chance.

Phip heard the cry from the house. Cherry's voice, high and frantic. There was no thinking on Phip's part then. He whirled, a swift involuntary action, prompted by the note of urgency in Cherry's voice. Quinn swore softly, his attention relaxed for that one short moment. As Phip turned, the gun in Quinn's had roared. White heat lanced along Phip's back. But the bullet had not blown his backbone apart as Quinn had threatened. It had merely slanted along a rib.

Phip's left hand slapped Quinn's gun arm down, his right fist hammered the man's nose, and Quinn staggered back, a grunt of pain escaping him. Phip closed with him then, left hand gripping the gunman's right wrist. Quinn fell, Phip on him, and they rolled over, fists slashing each other. There was no light here at the edge of the aspens. They fought by feel, Quinn not even cursing, for he had no breath to waste in futile words.

They were like two animals of the wilderness, fighting without rules. Only one would survive. It was fist, knee and boot. There was the taste of blood on Phip's lips; he was jarred, bruised and cut, but he didn't give up his hold on Quinn's wrist and the gunman wouldn't loosen his grip on the Colt.

They rolled over again, Phip's right hip feeling the bruising pressure of his gun that Quinn had dropped. He tried to smother Quinn with his weight, tried to hold him there while his right hand groped for the gun. Quinn jabbed a thumb at his eye, and missed, the point driving against his nose and sending a wave of pain through him. Then he had the gun and leaped away, releasing his hold on Quinn's right wrist.

Phip dropped flat so that he wouldn't be silhouetted against the pale sky. This was the finish; he knew it and he wanted it to be that way, for Cherry's scream seemed to be echoing and re-echoing across the canyon.

Quinn got his gun into play first: It was the wild and frantic shooting of a desperate man intent only on shaking lead out ahead of the other man. He was successful in that and because of his success he died, for Phip, less than twenty feet from him, targeted the gun flash. Bucky Quinn must have died in that first burst, for his own gun was silenced.

Phip jumped into the aspens and crawled behind Quinn, but there was no stirring in the grass, just the hard labor of a dying man fighting for his last breath. It came, and after that there wasn't even the sound of air sawing out of his lungs. Phip crawled to him and struck a match. By that tiny flame that blazed into the darkness, Phip saw Quinn's bruised face, the bubbles of blood on his lips, the slack look of death.

There was no sound now from the house. Phip ran toward it, pushing shells into the cylinder as he ran. He hit the porch and plunged on into the barroom. Mamie Decker called, "Wait, Phip."

He lunged through the door into the dining room and stopped. The darkness was so thick he could see only the vague outline of the cook's big body. He asked, "Where's Gale?"

"I don't know," Mamie said. "I'm scared. I heard Cherry yell and I got up. My room's back of the kitchen. I started up the stairs and Gale yelled for me to stay down here."

Phip moved across the dining room and looked up the stairs. The door at the top was closed, but a thin rectangle of light showed around it. A man would be blown to pieces the instant he came up the stairs and threw the door open.

"Gale's a damned fool," Mamie said bit-

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terly. "He sure kicked this into the open."

"Maybe not such a fool. He was sure Quinn would take care of me. All he wants is Cherry's name on that contract. Then a fire in the house would destroy a lot of evidence."

For a moment Phip stood staring at the line of light around the door. There was no sound. That was hard to understand, for freighters were asleep in those rooms and the wounded Frank Hays was in one of them. Some of them, Hays anyway, should be giving Gale trouble.

"This the only way to get up there?" Phip asked.

"The only way," the cook answered, "unless you want to take a ladder and climb—"

"Where's any ladder?"

"There's one leaning against the back of the house. Frank made it the other day so if our roof ever caught fire...."

Phip gripped her fat arm. "Listen," he whispered. "Have you got a gun?"

"Just a scattergun, but it's loaded with buckshot. If I get close enough..."

PHIP tightened his grip. "I said to listen. Maybe you'll get killed, but we've got to root 'em out of up there, or we'll all get killed, Cherry along with the rest of us. Them freighters must be Gale's men, or they'd have sided with Cherry by now. How many are there?"

"Six. They ain't all Gale's bunch."

"Some of 'em might have got the drop on the others. Now you give me five minutes. Then you get that scattergun and tell Gale you're coming up."

"All right," she said. "Get moving."

Phip ran back through the barroom and onto the porch. He circled the house and felt along the back until he stumbled against the ladder. Five minutes had been too short a time. He pulled the ladder down, swayed under its weight for a moment, then started back around the house to the front. The

minutes were falling away. Anything could happen once Gale was sure Callahan was alive.

Phip got the ladder up against the front wall of the house, hoping Gale wasn't in Cherry's parlor. If he were, he'd hear the clatter of the ladder being dropped against the wall. Phip went up, gun in hand, his eyes on the lighted window, but there was no sound of breaking glass, no grating of wood on wood as the sash was lifted. He was opposite it when Mamie Decker's big voice bellowed, "I'm coming up, Gale. I've got my scattergun and I'm gonna blow you into Kingdom Come in three pieces."

Gale shouted, "Cherry gets it if you do."

Phip kicked glass out of the window and slid into Cherry's parlor. The room was empty. He ran into the hall. Gale was standing at the stairs door, a gun in one hand, Cherry clutched in front of him with the other. A freighter stood just beyond him, his .45 palmed.

Mamie was coming up, the stairs creaking under her weight. She yelled, "Open up, Gale. You ain't getting out of this because you've got Cherry."

Cherry cried, "I'll take your deal, Randy. Let Mamie go."

Phip said, "Turn around, Randy."

Gale wheeled, Cherry throwing herself sideways and away from Gale as he turned. Both guns roared together, thunder-loud here in the narrow hall. Phip walked into the ballooning smoke, the smell of it a stench in his nostrils. Gale, a bullet hole in his head, went down on his face, falling against Cherry and knocking her off her feet.

Phip had had that one clear shot at Gale and he had made it good, but there was the freighter, and Phip hadn't been fast enough to take the two of them. The freighter fired, the bullet walloping Phip in the chest. He threw a shot, a wild one, for he was fighting to stay upright. The stairs door slammed open and Mamie let go with the

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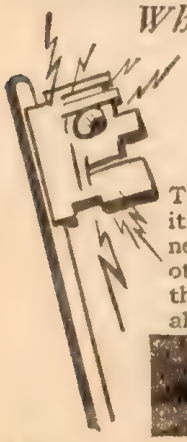

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shotgun. Another freighter had run out of the room farther down the hall. Phip, with one shoulder against the wall, dropped the man in his tracks. Then the tide washed in around him and Phip's legs refused to hold his weight. His last memory before the blackness took him was Cherry's voice, "Phip, you can't die. You can't."

* * *

There was no knowledge of day or night in Phip Callahan for a long time, no knowledge of anything except pain and gray figures that moved around his bed in a world of vague unreality. Then the gray figures became distinct and the vagueness was gone. He was looking up into Cherry's dark eyes.

She pressed the tips of her fingers against his lips. "No talk, pardner. You've been a long ways into the valley."

He slept again, and when he woke, his first memory was that of Cherry saying, "No talk, pardner." He wondered why she had used the word pardner, this girl who called herself a business woman. From his bed he could look out upon a sun-drenched earth. There was snow on the ground sparkling in the light.

He lay there a long time thinking about how he'd failed, thinking of Matt Lane and the stage company and the mail contract they had missed. Then Cherry came in, saw that he was awake, and came to his bed.

"The doctor said that as soon as you were able to listen, I was to tell you that everything is all right. He said that if you didn't worry, you'd be all right, although he doesn't know why except that you're too tough to die."

"Everything couldn't be all right," he breathed.

"Yes it is." She drew up a chair and sat down. "I came upstairs that night to get a gun, Phip. I was going back down to help

you, but Gale came into my room and asked me if I was going to sign with him. I said no and then he drew a gun on me and said I had to. He had another contract, one that said that if, through sickness or death, I was unable to manage the toll road and the roadhouse, he was to take over the management of both. I refused to sign and he got rough with me. I guess—I guess I screamed."

She wiped a hand across her face. "Two of the freighters were his men. They corralled the other four in Frank's room. That's the way it was when you came up the ladder and Mamie showed up with the shotgun." She smiled. "Well, it's over, Phip. One of the freighters left that night to get a doctor from Gunnison, and I hired one to take my signed contract over the pass to Matt Lane in Canon City. It wasn't much of a contract but it was the best I could draw up. Since then we've heard your company has the mail contract from the government."

He could only lie there and stare at her. She leaned forward and took his hand. "There's one thing I want you to understand, Phip. I knew what Randy Gale was, all right, but I wanted to keep it on a business basis and I thought I could use Randy to make you and Matt Lane give me a better deal. Then, after you kissed me, I. . . . , well, I kind of changed my mind. I did recognize a man's honest love when he offered it to me. Being a business woman didn't seem so important. I just wanted to be a wife."

Then Phip Callahan found the right words to tell her how much he loved her, the words he had thought about as he'd sat beside a hundred campfires or clung to the high seat as he'd tooled a Concord around the turns of a narrow mountain road.

She leaned down and kissed him, murmuring, "A partnership, Phip, a real one that will last a life time."

THE END

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(Continued from page 52)

Merritt said harshly, "We're here to see if you've made up your mind yet, Maury. What's it to be—a divvy of that loot or seven more years in Yuma?"

"How much do you want, Merritt?"

"You know how much."

"I want to hear you say it, friend."

Carmody nudged Merritt, and said, in a tone he would have used to a couple of children, "You don't want to go back, Maury. You're young. You've got too much to lose. Lew and I are asking only a third share of the money for each of us. Be sensible, my friend."

Dan lifted his voice, saying, "Blake? You get it?"

Blake came around from the side of the house, on foot, his rifle in the crook of his arm. "Got it," he said. "I've also got the money, gentlemen." He was smiling at the startled pair. "I've also got the man who was in on the hold-up with Lefty Kane."

Lew Merritt swore.

Frank Carmody said, "All right, Blake. How about a deal?"

Blake chuckled. "You'll get a deal," he said. "I'm going to see to it that your name is mud in Durbin from now on, Carmody. And that your friend loses his deputy sheriff's badge."

Later, after the pair had driven off, Laurie cooked supper for Dan and Blake and herself. Blake said, after he had eaten, "You two will want to be alone, so I'll head for town."

They watched from the doorway as he rode away.

Dan had his arm about Laurie. Despite his wound, he felt good. Better than he had felt in three years.

"It's over at last," he said.

"No," said Laurie. "It's just beginning."

He knew what she meant. It would be easy to forget the past, with Laurie helping him wipe out the ugly memory.

THE END

(Continued from page 95)

now. I only hated myself. I guess I'd have felt just like you if it was my kid that got it."

Rankin found one of Mickey's hands in the darkness, and he felt the big man's bleeding fingers squeeze his own. "Now git," Mickey said, "or you won't get out of here either."

Pushing his carbine before him, Rankin shoved himself through the hole and into the night outside. He glanced back and saw Mickey's face dimly in the hole, and that was the last time he ever saw the big man.

For the first angry and surprised yip came from the mountainside as a brave saw some movement near the band of horses; and then the answering whoops of the soldiers split the night, followed by the solid rumble of pounding hooves as they stampeded the unused Indian ponies before them.

Rankin ran now, and he felt the angry whirring of Indian bullets about him. He stretched his legs toward the spot where Clancy stood holding a horse for him. One horse he was holding, not two. Clancy had known.

He caught the rope reins of the pony and lit astride its bare back. He saw the Indians pouring off the ridge, and as he pulled away he saw the first brave near the bottom of the slope tumbling and trying to turn away from the fire which came from the hole in the mountainside and dropped him.

As they passed out of range he turned and saw Clancy's face beside him, and he nodded numbly as the Irishman said, "There goes a brave man, Sergeant."

He kicked more speed out of his pony, but he was still within earshot when the firing behind them suddenly stopped and he was left riding away from nothing but emptiness and silence.

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